

INVESTIGATION OF MONUMENTAL ARCHITECTURE IN THE AREA OF THE NORTHWESTERN PALACE COMPLEX AT EL PERÚ-WAKA', PETÉN

David F. Lee
Jennifer C. Piehl
Juan Carlos Meléndez

Keywords: Maya archaeology, Guatemala, Petén, El Perú-Waka', excavations, tombs, termination rituals, hieroglyphic stairway, Ballgame

The El Perú-*Waka'* Archaeological Project initiated investigations in 2003, with the sponsorship of the Southern Methodist University. During the two field seasons of the project, the major part of the studies focused on the nuclear zone of the site, which consisted of four main plazas that covered an approximate area of 1 km².

One of them was Plaza 4, and research was conducted in the Ballgame patio complex that included Structures L11-30, L11-31 and L11-32, located at the northeast of this plaza. Also, Structure L11-33, to the north, and a part of the palace complex was examined, to discover the remains of a hieroglyphic stairway located at the south of the building.

At west of Plaza 4 there was an Acropolis with two plazas identified as North and South Plazas, with the level of the North Plaza at a height of 6 m above that of the South Plaza. However, research concentrated on Structure L11-38, located west of the South Plaza. We shall now present a synthesis of the investigations conducted so far in the Plaza 4 buildings.

THE BALLGAME PATIO COMPLEX

At the northeast of Plaza 4 there is a Ballgame patio integrated by Structures L11-30 and L11-31. The first, with dimensions of 18.60 m in length, 9.50 m in width, and 2 m in height, is located north of this complex and has suffered severe lootings, with two illegal excavations identified at the north side, and one at the very heart of the structure. The latter allowed us to collect a large amount of sherds, even though from a disturbed context. After, the excavations were backfilled.

Structure L11-31, located south of the complex and joined by a terrace to Structure L11-33 at west, presented two illegal excavations at the center, which were documented and backfilled. This building was 18.50 m long, 16 m wide and 3.20 m tall. An outset stairway was identified at the south side of the structure, 1.50 m tall and 10 m wide, together with the beams, which were defined with some difficulty due to the large number of trees growing on its surface.

The excavations conducted exposed two construction stages: the superstructure that integrated the Ballgame, possibly with several modifications, and one well preserved substructure. The substructure consisted of finely cut limestone blocks of different sizes. The excavations conducted at the southwest of the structure made it possible to identify a niche that was part of the substructure and that had an approximate dimension of 0.40 m in width and 0.30 m in height.

Based on a preliminary ceramic analysis, it was established that the Ballgame patio complex included dates that extended from the Late to the Terminal Classic periods. However, in L11-31-Sub, the pottery was somewhat earlier; in fact, ceramic samples corresponding to the Águila Orange and Dos Arroyos types were recovered, but further analysis of the context is needed. An excavation unit was placed in the middle of the field, on the Ballgame corridor, in an attempt to locate some marker. Although the presence of no marker could be established, several interesting features were indeed discovered, like a well preserved floor found under the refill of the plaza floor.

Corresponding to a later date, a deposit of materials was found which included ceramics, mostly red and black monochromes and several polychromatic examples, animal bones, some of them probably of big cats, and a regular amount of obsidian and flint flakes. In the same stratigraphic level of the deposit there was a cache, consisting of two vessels placed lip against lip, of the Águila Orange type.

Therefore, according to the preliminary analysis of the ceramic found in the deposit, it is possible to speculate that its temporality corresponded to the Early Classic period, while the materials are similar to those collected in Structure L11-31.

In other words, the Ballgame patio was built during the Late Classic period, when the local elite settled in the palace area located west of Plaza 4. The temporality during which the Ballgame patio was used extended to the Terminal Classic period. This approach is grounded on the ceramic analysis, as samples of the Pabellón Molded-Carved type were collected in the first levels of the excavation conducted in Structure L11-30. Future studies in the Ballgame patio complex will define the function of Structure L11-31-Sub and will provide as well an interpretation of the ritual deposit.

THE HIEROGLYPHIC STAIRWAY

Structure L11-33 lies between the Ballgame patio and the palace complex at the north of Plaza 4. These buildings shared a common terrace with Structure L11-31, located east. The excavations conducted in Structure L11-33 were supervised in 2004 by Jennifer Piehl and Stanley Guenter, and were designed to investigate the possibility that the central stairway of the structure was a hieroglyphic stairway. Ian Graham had previously documented 24 blocks with iconography and inscriptions carved in bas-relief, which he found in the rubble of the collapse and the looting. The text and the iconography he documented did not produce any comprehensible data, a fact that led to the hypothesis that maybe additional cut blocks could be found in the excavation of the structure.

The iconography and the text of the stairway were examined by Stanley Guenter. Six of the blocks reported by Graham were not found, and the possibility exists that they were taken away from the site by looters, after his visit. The 2004 field season revealed five additional cut blocks, of which just a single one was found *in situ*. Guenter's analysis indicated that the inscription made no sense and that apparently not all of its component parts were used in the stairway. The iconographic pieces include one altar, portions of a feather costume and the bust of a warrior. No complete dates appeared. King *K'inich B'ahlam* was mentioned, represented in Stela 22, dating to 692 AD. The text includes as well two references to the Ballgame. The incomplete text, its early style compared with the Late or Terminal Classic date of Structure L11-33, and its proximity to the Ballgame patio, where this text might originally come from, makes us consider that the placement of the text in the stairway of Structure L11-33 was a reutilization of these blocks, which may have been taken from an earlier Late Classic structure associated to the Ballgame patio.

The major excavation goals for Structure L11-33 in the 2004 field season consisted in clearing the remains of the collapse in the stairway, asserting the nature of the architecture, evaluating its preservation and defining the construction chronology of the structure. The clearing process exposed seven steps of a wide central stairway that led to a main platform, where no standing masonry superstructure was found.

Due to the collapse of the structure and its subsequent looting, the stairway appeared poorly preserved. Most cut blocks, particularly those present in the lower steps, were absent or had slid. Just one single block was found *in situ*, in Step 2. This block represented the back of a hand that appears to be wearing a bracelet on its wrist, and which was spreading a number of small circular objects.

The excavations in the main platform indicated that this, together with the stairway, were built on one single construction event during the transition from the Late Classic to the Terminal Classic period, that is, late in the history of the events that took place at the monumental center of *Waka'*. This would be consistent with ritual activities after 743 AD conducted at Plaza 4, where Stelae 37, 38 and 39, and the altar of Stela 38, were erected during this later period of the site's history.

By means of the investigations conducted in the terrace that extends between Structure L11-33 and L11-31, a deposit above the floor, close to the union between the terrace and the stairway, was found. Apparently, it was mainly associated with the terrace that created the access between both structures in the Ballgame patio, rather than with Structure L11-33. The deposit consisted of ceramic fragments mainly dating to the Terminal Classic period, as well as of modified human and animal bone remains, all deposited in a concentrated area that was burnt at the time of laying the deposit. The faunal remains include a tooth used as a pendant, and a scraper. The human remains include cranial and post-cranial features of several adult individuals. The deposit has close similarities with a large termination deposit located in front of the Southeast Acropolis, interpreted as such for the following reasons:

- First, for the composition of the deposit, mainly consisting of ceramic fragments and human bone remains in a burnt area, similar to other deposits in *Waka'* and other sites across the Maya Lowlands, strongly grounded in the

fields of iconography, ethnography and archaeology as material remains of termination events. In contrast, the deposit was not similar to the typical middens.

- Second, for the localization of the deposit in an architectural space of transition and associated with an access to the Ballgame patio, suggesting that a termination event took place there to ritually close the access when utilization ceased. The Terminal Classic dating of the deposit is also consistent with the possible closure of this site area, close to the time when its use for royal activities in this sector ceased.
- Future excavations on top of the terrace in future field seasons would be of help to produce a context for this termination deposit.

Research at Structure L11-33 during the 2004 field season has revealed a history that is consistent with the late ritual approach for this sector of the site. The structure was built in one single construction phase, incorporating blocks with iconographic designs or inscriptions in its stairway. It would seem that these blocks were taken from other places closely related to the Ballgame patio and reused in Structure L11-33. The late construction date of L11-33 makes of this reusing of a text a different possibility. The partial incorporation of the text in Structure L11-33 appears to have been part of the ritual emphasis on Plaza 4 during the VIII century. The termination of the access to the Ballgame patio points to another late ritual event in this site sector. A more thorough ceramic analysis and future excavations will more clearly assert the sequence of these materials associated with the structure.

THE NORTHWEST PALACE

In 2004, under David Lee's supervision, the excavations continued at the Northwestern Palace Complex. The palace was an Acropolis with two main elevated plazas and gallery structures at the north end, and with an extension of 100 m from north to south. The east side of the Acropolis formed the west end of Plaza 3, and consisted of a stairway 50 m long that led to the South Elevated Plaza.

The 2003 excavations exposed the east façade of Structure L11-38, revealing three late modifications to the basal platform of the structure and two modifications to the superstructure's platform. At an earlier stage, the platform was covered with a block of tiers. Later, a retaining wall was built in front of the structure, and a stucco surface covered the stairway. In the third phase, a very wide frontal step was added facing the retaining wall. The ceramic analysis suggests that these two subsequent phases corresponded to a later date, approximately towards the end of the Late Classic period. The superstructure had a pilaster in origin. Later, a refilled rectangular column was added, thus closing the east side of the pilaster. This construction supported a vaulted stone roof.

In 2004, our first excavation goal was to complete the stratigraphy of Structure L11-38, to define its chronological sequence. However, during the third day of excavation works, the stone roof of a vaulted tomb was discovered. The vaulted room was built with stone and mortar. The stones used were not dressed, and the use of mortar in

the construction suggested that this space was built only to be used as a tomb. The tomb was introduced in Structure L11-38, as indicated by the cut stucco floors, visible in the north and south walls of the chamber.

The dimensions of the tomb's chamber were: 3.40 m from north to south, 1.25 m from east to west, and a height of 2.10 m. The south portion of the east wall had collapsed sometime in the past, refilling the space of the tomb with the medial portion of the wall. The matrix found behind the collapse contained thousands of fragments of prismatic obsidian blades. Right at the center of the chamber, on a stone bench, the remains of a female were found. The bench was a blend of coarse and cut stones. Its surface was very irregular and presented abundant holes. The organic matrix observed over the entire surface of the bench as well as above the floor around its base, suggests it supported a perishable platform, probably some wooden litter which following to its decomposing, resulted in a shift of the material. The re-entering to the tomb in ancient times is also a fact. The skull and the femur bones were removed. Several cranium and femur fragments that were left behind suggest that this activity was verified after decomposition, introducing an additional factor at the time of examining the contents of the tomb.

Twenty three complete vessels were found inside the tomb. With the exception of Vessel 23 placed on the abdomen of the individual, all vessels were over the floor surrounding the bench in the north, east and west sides. The vessels varied in size, shape and decoration, from miniature tripod vessels to large polychromatic bowls, dishes, and incised bowls. Preliminary analysis has dated the tomb to the Late Classic period. This date is consistent with the style of other artifacts.

There is also evidence of a later modification of the vessels, with incisions on the decoration and painted stucco on the originally elaborated surfaces. Vessel 4 was identified in the field as a miniature tripod vessel of the Fine Gray group, placing it at a late time. Vessel 15, a tripod censer with a lid, contained a large and well preserved fragment of something we have visually identified as copal resin.

Over 1600 greenstone artifacts were found in the tomb, including beads, rectilinear small plates, floral pieces, large discs, carved *Ik* features, and a plate with the image of the Jester God – 4 cm per 10 cm- also known as *huunal*. Fragments of a greenstone mosaic composition were recovered. Its location, over the floor and west of the bench, suggests they probably were originally in the head and chest area. The shell eyes and obsidian eyelids suggest that some of these fragments were a part of pectorals, with mosaic masks. Other pieces, like the *huunal*, and the large floral features and ear flares, were drilled to be applied on textiles or other perishable materials. Shell motifs and cut stones were as well identified, but these had been drilled probably to be hanged from the belt of the individual. There were 22 greenstone drilled square plates, probably the pieces of a helmet lined with metal sheets. This type of headdress is associated with warfare, suggesting that this woman may have been a *k'alomte'* or military chief.

A certain number of greenstone fragments show some type of glue adhered to the rear surface, suggesting they once were glued to another surface. These included pieces of possible zoomorphic masks or deities. Some of the other mosaic pieces may as well have been a part of the headdress decoration. It is not advisable to

continue with speculations of this sort until a future analysis is completed. Over 800 shell artifacts were collected, including rectilinear small plates of the *Strombus* sp., and dental pieces, beads, and shell plates of the *Spondylus* sp., as well as small complete shells drilled to be used as pendants. Additional shell artifacts were found near the waist of the individual, probably representing pieces of bracelets and of his belt.

In addition, fresh water pearls were found, some showing glue adhered to them, suggesting a large number of mosaic artifacts. Moreover, stingray spines were found in his pelvic area, objects that were known to be used by males in their genitals for bloodletting.

The analysis of the materials found in this tomb is still in a preliminary stage. What we can say at this point is that during the Late Classic period, a royal woman was buried in this palace. She was adorned with a greenstone mosaic helmet, a finely cut jewel with the motif of a *huunal*, and paraphernalia consisting of thousands of shell and greenstone beads. At a later time the tomb was reopened, and her cranium and femur bones were removed, perhaps to be used in the preparation of an ancestors bundle. This, combined with natural decay, resulted in the disturbance of materials inside the tomb.

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

The investigations conducted at the Ballgame patio complex by Juan Carlos Meléndez, at the hieroglyphic stairway by Jennifer Piehl and Stanley Guenter, as well as those at the palace conducted by David Lee are still at an early stage of excavation and analysis. However, at this point, work has produced a clear portrait of the nature of the activities, both in life and death, that took place in this significant enclosure of the ancient site of *Waka'*. In this way, and as progress is made in our work making it possible to relate it with activities conducted in other parts of the site, a clearer image will come forward in regard to the role played by this ancient city in the political landscape of the Maya.

REFERENCES

Freidel, David, and Héctor Escobedo (ed)

2003 *Informe Preliminar de la Primera Temporada de Campo del Proyecto El Perú-Waka'*, 2003. Southern Methodist University, Dallas.

Lee, David F.

2003 WK-06: Excavaciones en la Estructura L11-38. In *Proyecto Arqueológico El Perú-Waka', Informe 1* (H.L. Escobedo and D. Freidel, ed), pp. 145-172. Southern Methodist University, Dallas.

Meléndez, Juan C.

2003 Excavaciones en las Estructuras L11-30 y L11-32. In *Proyecto Arqueológico El Perú-Waka', Informe 1* (H.L. Escobedo and D. Freidel, ed), pp. 173-192. Southern Methodist University, Dallas.