

MONUMENTAL ARCHITECTURE IN THE EASTERN SECTION OF PLAZAS 1 AND 2 AT EL PERÚ-WAKA', PETÉN

*Olivia Navarro Farr
Horacio Martínez*

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The archaeological site of El Perú-*Waka'* is one of the most outstanding Maya cities in the northwestern region of the Central Lowlands, not only because of its monumentality and epigraphic record, but mainly because of where it is geographically located, in close vicinity to the San Pedro River. The site rests on an escarpment and has four main plazas. These have a large number of carved monuments, associated with the major constructions.

The studies described below were conducted at the east edge of Plazas 1 and 2 of El Perú-*Waka'*. The major interest in the first two field seasons was focused on the consolidation and preservation of pyramid construction M12-32, damaged by looters; investigations were also carried out at Structure M13-1 or Southeast Acropolis, clearing and recovering materials disturbed with the illegal excavations, and subsequently examining the ritual activities conducted during the Late-Terminal Classic period. The issue that brings all these investigations together is monumental architecture as a part of that public space, and the meaning it may have had for the ancient inhabitants of that site. This is evident not only because of where these two structures were located in Plazas 1 and 2, but also because of their related monuments and dedications.

STRUCTURE M12-32

Except for Ian Graham's works, little was known about the archaeology of El Perú-*Waka'*. One of the consequences of the poor attention paid to the site made of it a permanent target for looters, who conducted illegal excavations that affected and put at risk the stability of many structures, mainly those located at the site core. This is why our project has considered the rescue of these buildings a priority, and has submitted, last year, a systematic plan of intervention that includes a photographic record, the drawing of trenches and looting pits, and their consolidation, in full.

One of the structures intervened as of last year is Building M12-32, which presented two looting tunnels at the west and east façades, respectively. The first tunnel was intervened in 2003, and it was expected that full consolidation could be completed during this new field season. Structure M12-32, located at the west end of Plaza 1, was one of the tallest buildings at the site, with a height of 18 m. It was pyramidal in shape, and the entire plaza, as well as the buildings that surrounded it could be observed from its top. Due to the characteristics observed, this was one of the

buildings that drew the attention the most, as it resembled other pyramid structures from the area of Central Petén. Possibly, this contributed to the fact that it was one of the buildings most damaged by lootings, as it presented two huge tunnels that have caused the collapse of several sections of the structure.

During the 2003 field season, the intervention of the looting tunnel located on the west face of the building was initiated, identified by Juan Carlos Pérez as unit WK03A-01. This was a tunnel with a length of 19 m, a height of 2.35 m, and a width of 3 m. At the end of the tunnel there were two short looting extensions, one at left, 3.50 m long (WK03A-04), and the other one at right, 2.50 m long (WK03A-05), and a collapse cone of approximately 22.5 m³ (Pérez 2003:83).

From the beginning, both the tunnel and the collapse cone were approached as separate activities, as they presented different physical characteristics. First, the decision was made to reduce the dimensions of the tunnel, which remained with a width of 1.20 m, and an average height of 2.30 m (Pérez 2003:83). Thus, during the past season it was possible to build an arch of 4.40 m with 15.60 lineal meters of wall. It was also suggested that the collapse cone was refilled by means of the construction of another tunnel in the upper part of the structure.

The main objectives in the 2004 season were the consolidation and stabilization of the looting tunnels present in Structure M12-32, the completion of consolidation works in the west tunnel initiated in 2003 as well as in the collapse cone, the liberation of the vegetation that was causing damage and putting at risk the stability of the structure, and the documentation of the architectural traits inside the building, through the use of photographs and drawings.

During this new field season it was decided to continue with consolidation works in the looting tunnel located at the west end. This was defined as WK-03A-01, and during 2004, we were able to build 11 lineal meters of wall and 8.90 meters of arch, thus consolidating the entire looting tunnel, the collapse cone included. The methodology of work was based mainly on the construction of two lateral walls, one at each side of the tunnel's wall. The stone used was that of the looting, and the more regular blocks were placed at front. The space comprised between the wall and the wall of the building was refilled with mortar (lime, cement, sifted dirt and water) and medium size stones adequately place so that no empty spaces were left. Some sections of the wall achieved a thickness of 0.90 m. In addition, two looting extensions located along the tunnel were refilled and denominated WK03A-03, and WK03A-06.

Inside the tunnel and 3 m before its ending, where the collapse cone was located, the decision was made to reduce its width. It was changed from 1.20 m to 0.80 m, to refill the collapse cone and prevent the creation of another tunnel in the upper part, so that it could be subsequently consolidated. In this way, the arch became more reduced and steep, with an average height of 2 m, but with a better consistency to support the refill weight. In addition, several beams of sapodilla and quebracho were placed inside the collapse cone, to provide a better support and stability. With this, the collapse cone was finally refilled using the same mix and thin medium size stones.

At the end of the tunnel two looting extensions denominated 4 and 5 were left open, with the hope that thanks to the works completed this year, research inside the building, which for the time being shows evidence of at least three construction stages, could be undertaken during the 2005 field season. The inner refill is remarkably compact; it includes earth, stucco and stone, and is supported by at least three stucco floors of a hard consistency. Thus, and by the end of the coming season, we hope that additional knowledge is available in regard to this building, which because of its characteristics and location, and because of the two stelae placed at its front, probably served some particular function, most likely linked to public rituals.

STRUCTURE M13-1

Structure M13-1 stands at the east edge of Plaza 2. It is quite large and includes an ample central stairway that climbs to a quite elevated temple. This temple is flanked by a terrace at north and an apparent temple with no terrace at south. M13-1 has a façade that looks at the west of Plaza 2 and to its northern edge, bordering the southeast corner of Plaza 1, with a lower elevation of approximately 3 or 4 m, compared to Plaza 2.

When work was initiated, we knew that Structure M13-1 had at least five monuments in association with the construction. One such monument was Stela 10, found in a standing position in front of the north terrace of Structure M13-1, and then Stela 9, found in three pieces at the corner formed by this terrace and the north side of the stairway. Because Structure M13-1 fully dominated the east side of Plaza 2, and because of the many associated monuments present there, it was clear to us how important it was for the local inhabitants in terms of politics and ceremonies, even before works were initiated.

Unfortunately, Structure M13-1, like so many other constructions at the site, suffered different damages caused by illegal excavations, including at least 12 looting pits and tunnels across the construction. Therefore, one of the main objectives in this operation was to clear the rubble in the northwest face of the structure, produced by a looting pit excavated inside the northern portion of the main stairway.

Investigations in Structure M13-1 were initiated during the first season of works at El Perú-*Waka'* in 2003, and continued in 2004. Throughout these two seasons, the objectives included the clearing of rubble, mentioned earlier, the investigation of ritual activities, and the achievement of a better understanding of the monuments associated with the structure. Early in 2003, a large amount of ceramic sherds began to appear, as well as broken flint points, obsidian blades, figurine heads, pieces of mother of pearl, carved sea shell, and several fragments of human bones mixed with the looting rubble cleared. After excavating the rubble, as well as a surface of organic earth that existed prior to the looting of the stairway, a peculiar level of collapse and fall was found. Under the collapse layer, and at times mixed with it, there were partial vessels, broken dishes in their original position, a large amount of ceramic sherds, flint projectile points, obsidian blades, carved shells and fragmented human bones (long bones and cranium bones, mainly). All this material was dated

between the Late Classic and the Terminal Classic periods (Acuña 2003:4), and was found on the last floor of Plaza 2.

It was concluded that this was the primary context of a deposit, which presented the same typology exhibited by the artifacts recorded in the looting rubble. Later, it was decided to proceed with a detailed excavation displaying a very thorough documentation procedure, to compile a sample of the materials. The excavation and documentation of this deposit associated with Structure M13-1 was one of the major focuses of this operation, during the two field seasons at El Perú-*Waka'*.

In 2003, the area of the deposit excavated was of 12 m². In 2004, the remaining area was excavated, with an extension of approximately 15 m². Altogether, the excavation of the deposit covered an area of almost 27 m². In 2003, the deposit exposed six layers of ceramic material, smashed semi-complete vessels, lithic objects, human bones, and a variety of special findings. In 2004, the area included five layers of identical materials, the fifth one of which could not be excavated due to time restraints.

The materials in the deposit were recorded according to their position in the grid, established through the use of tapes and compasses, prior to initiating the excavation. Each previously established unit was divided in squares of 1 x 1 m; the squares were in turn divided in 50 x 50 cm blocks. Each block was designated a letter according to its position in each grid, and it was also designated according to its cardinal position within the unit. The materials were recorded with a provenience that included the number of the original unit, the northeast, southeast, southwest or northwest quadrant within the unit, and a letter that corresponded to the precise block. The letters were assigned following always the same order, beginning at the northeast corner of the quadrant and then moving on to the southeast corner and then to the southwest corner, to finally end at the northwest corner. Such was the pattern used to assign letters to the blocks of each quadrant in each unit. In this way we were able to document the location of all the deposit materials within a 50 cm space. Those materials located on the division lines of squares, blocks, or units, were in turn separately collected and recorded with all the necessary information to guarantee their exact positions.

Currently, it has become customary to approach the termination and dedication processes like analogies of life and death cycles (Mock 1998:4). As to the termination, it is described as a process that may include, among other things, the burning, smashing or mutilation of ceramic objects and other artifacts (Mock 1998:5). The interpretation offered here, considering the finding and documentation of the primary context on top of a terminal floor, is that these remains of broken vessels, pieces of shell ornaments, fragmented grinding stones cut in halves, flint projectile points with evidence of burning, fragments of molded stucco and fragmented human bones also occasionally burnt, represent a termination deposit laid in the northwestern area of Structure M13-1.

Evidence suggests that this is a termination deposit and not a simple garbage sample, for the following reasons:

- The very low amount of animal bones expected to be present in a garbage pit should be considered. In fact, of the few animal bones found in the deposit, most corresponded to animal teeth perforated at the root, of the kind used as adornments. On the contrary, there was a fair amount of fragmented human bones, most of which appeared to be long bones and cranial bones. Should this be a definite pattern confirmed through laboratory analysis, it would be interesting to consider that these could be the typical bones found in ancestors bundle-type deposits, perhaps representing “particular symbols of the social order and of ordinal successions” (McAnany 1995:46). However, it is worth to stress the need to conduct laboratory analysis before initiating any debate of this sort.
- Another interesting piece of information in regard to the bones is the way how they were eventually found; for example, in 2003, several cranium fragments were found one on top of the other, a pattern very similar to that of the smashed vessels, also found one on top of the other. Also, there were abundant projectile points cut in halves and with signs of burning. Several smashed vessels were also discovered, as well as a large amount of sherds spread throughout the area.
- The place should also be considered. This entire process took place in front of a monumental building at the plaza level, and in a public space. As a rule, one would expect to find a garbage pit with materials related to a residential structure, located at the back of it. In this case the structure was not of the residential type, and the materials were placed at the front, overlooking one of the largest plazas of the site. In this case, there was no construction in the area that might have fallen from above causing the breakage, *in situ*, of complete vessels and dishes. On the contrary, this was a rather open space.
- There is an additional important trait associated with the deposit. Two stelae were somehow associated with the deposit. They both date to the Early Classic period. One of them (Stela 10) was still standing with a collapsed platform all around; the collapse was found totally mixed with the deposit materials. The other monument (Stela 9) was found broken in three pieces, one of which was very well preserved on top of one portion of the excavated area. Even though the precise relationship between the stelae and the deposit could not be ascertained, they were clearly placed there in ancient times. In fact, Mock (1998:5) believes that the stelae themselves may have been designed for manipulation, to distribute the fragments here and there as part of a termination ritual.

Other sites also include deposits similar to the one associated with M13-1. The Aguateca Archaeological Project has found evidence of quick abandonment and occasional termination deposits as evidence of warfare (Inomata 2003:60). In the case of Aguateca, Inomata describes what he took for termination deposits in palace structures M7-22 and M7-32. His approach favors this interpretation, in part for the abundant evidence of burning observed in bones, shell, sherds, and –in several areas- floors. The dense deposits include materials such as sherds, bone fragments, broken flint tools, shell ornaments and grinding stones fragments. In the case of the ceramic materials from this Aguatecan deposit, and according to laboratory

research, there is not one vessel with possibilities of being rebuilt among the multitude of sherds found (Inomata 2003:54). As to our deposit, even though there were actually several examples of partial vessels spread all over the place, there were many sherds, part of which may or may not correspond to materials with possibilities of being rebuilt.

Interestingly, in one of the rooms the collapse was mixed with the artifacts of the deposit (Inomata 2003:54); the fact that these contexts were mixed in ancient times favors the notion that this was a termination event and not a mere garbage dump. The collapse of the small platform associated with Stela 10 is similarly mixed with the artifacts of the deposit in our example.

As previously said, two stelae were associated with the deposit. In 2004, the process of excavation and restoration of Stela 6, found with its carved face downwards and broken in at least three pieces, was initiated. The discovery of Stela 6 was highly important and significant, for the following reasons: this stela apparently fell or was pushed from its original position in front of Structure M13-1. It was probably pushed by the monuments (the base of Stela 41 and its associated altar) that were placed immediately under Stela 6. The stela depicted a female figure in the typical Late Classic style, and like Stela 11, it was the impersonation of the Lady *K'abil* (Guenther, personal communication 2004). Besides, it was placed on the axis of the structure. Although it does not seem to have been mutilated in antiquity, it indeed suffered erosion due to the percolation of water in the earth where it had remained for years.

After excavating Stela 6, an unexpected occurrence took place: the finding of the base of a previously unknown stela with an associated altar. Peculiarly, none of the two monuments presented traces of having been carved. Although this excavation was conducted not more than 15 m away from the main stairway of Structure M13-1, at the plaza level and down to the bedrock, at no time a floor was found. Under the monuments –which were one on top of the other- the bedrock was reached. Even though we cannot elaborate at this point on the meaning of this finding, as no other deposit was defined as was the case with the northern area of that stairway- the pattern of piling up fragments of monuments, as found several times in the deposit, cannot be ignored.

Often times, the line between dedication and termination cannot be easily defined (Mock 1998), so that our findings at El Perú-*Waka'* are not an exception. It is evident that although the Mesoamerican archaeological community is coming to some basic agreement about the existence of these termination processes expressed in the public and domestic spaces of the Maya, there is still a long way to go until the more subtle meanings among the large variety of termination processes are finally understood.

CONCLUSION

The two first field seasons in Plazas 1 and 2 at El Perú-*Waka'* have been quite successful. A termination event dating to the Late and Terminal Classic period was documented, one that probably was of a great significance to the residents of the site. Also, works continued in regard to the consolidation and protection of a

structure that was pretty much unstable prior to the intervention. In addition, progress has been made in outlining a more accurate chronology for the different construction phases. It has been possible to gain plenty of understanding on the true dynamics of that public area at the site, notwithstanding the research is now posing new questions.

We have hardly begun to recognize the meaning of termination deposits and the different reasons that may have motivated such a practice. We still face the challenge of unveiling the mystery behind these processes that are manifestations of crucial religious beliefs of the Maya civilization.

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