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An Archaeological Investigation of Mayapán-Style Ceremonial Groups in the Central Petén

Research Year: 1996

Culture: Maya

Chronology: Late Post Classic

Location: Petén, Guatemala

Site: Zacpetén

During the 1996 and 1997 field seasons of the *Proyecto Maya Colonial*, excavations were conducted at **Zacpetén**, a Late Postclassic period Maya site in *Petén, Guatemala*, by **Timothy Pugh**. The Zacpetén project was primarily focused on two temple assemblages constructed nearly identically to assemblages at Mayapán, in Yucatán, México.

The two sites were further linked because the Early Historic period occupants of Zacpetén, the Kowoj, told the Spaniards that they had migrated from Mayapán sometime after its collapse around 1450 A.D.

The goal of the project was to investigate the ceremonial architecture and households at Zacpetén to compare these data with those recovered by the *Carnegie Institution* during their excavations at Mayapán. The purpose of the comparison is to describe ritual practice at Zacpetén, to observe how the performance of rituals and the construction of ritual space changed between the Kowoj's migration from Mayapán and their abandonment of Zacpetén.

Two temples, three oratorios, seven shrines, three colonnaded halls, a ceremonial sakbe, two nonarchitectural ceremonial features, and five households were excavated at Zacpetén. In order to reconstruct ritual practices in the ceremonial and domestic buildings, the excavations were conducted so that activity areas could be discerned. This was accomplished placing a grid with a resolution of one by one meters over each building, screening the soil with one-fourth inch screen, and bagging artifacts by their one by one meter units.

The project revealed that the architecture of Zacpetén is very similar to that of Mayapán but, many variations occurred between the migration of the Kowoj from Mayapán and their subsequent abandonment of Zacpetén. For example, Mayapán ceremonial and domestic structures tend to be bilaterally symmetrical while those of Zacpetén are asymmetrical in both their construction and activity areas. In addition, late Classic stelae

and altars were found incorporated into Late Postclassic wall constructions at Zacpetén, but not at Mayapán. The primary activities discerned in the ceremonial buildings were paired human effigy censer placements, copal burning, ceremonial drinking, and caches. In ceremonial areas outside buildings, we encountered noneffigy censer placements, human burials, evidence of human sacrifice, and a mass grave of disarticulated and partially articulated human bones.

When sampling domestic structures, five buildings ranging from the smallest to the largest sizes were selected in order to crosscut social strata. The excavations revealed that domestic structures included a front room and a back room. The front rooms were usually plastered and were clean or contained ceremonial artifacts. The back room contained domestic artifacts. In regards to household ritual, it was found that only the largest households utilized the same ceremonial paraphernalia as encountered in the ceremonial groups.

Submitted 12/01/1997 by:
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