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## **The Architectural Development of an Early Maya Structure at Nakbé, Petén, Guatemala**



**Research Year:** 1996

**Culture:** Maya

**Chronology:** Early Middle Pre-Classic

**Location:** Petén, Guatemala

**Site:** Nakbé

### **Table of Contents**

[Abstract](#)

[Resumen](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Research Problem](#)

[Investigation Setting](#)

[Proposed Methodology](#)

[Architectural Details](#)

[1996, 1998 Excavations: Structure 1](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Tunnel Excavations](#)

[Significance](#)

[List of Figures](#)

[Sources Cited](#)

## **Abstract**

Excavations conducted on Structure 1 at the early Maya site of Nakbé have provided valuable new information related to the nature and form of the architectural evolution of a construction which ultimately became the dominant building at the site. Structure 1, which towers 48 meters above the forest floor, revealed architectural sequences that are consistent with data from other areas of the site. Excavations suggest that prominent architectural art (masks and panels) and the triadic architecture form, which are characteristic features of Late Preclassic structures in the northern Petén, are not found prior to the Late Preclassic period (ca. 300 B.C.). This suggests that architectural sculpture and triadic structures were quickly standardized by an emerging elite, probably as theological propaganda. At least nine Middle and Late Preclassic stucco floors extended under the last stairway of Structure 1, indicating that earlier structures were likely to be found buried within the building. Subsequent excavations proved this to be the case. In addition, evidence of a peculiar activity of ancient excavations into the early structures during the early Late Preclassic period (ca. 300 B.C.) suggests the possibility of an intrusive burial or tomb. The data have allowed testing of a developmental model of architectural evolution by examining detailed construction sequences, architectural forms, and antecedent architectural art on an early Maya monumental structure.

## **Resumen**

Las excavaciones realizadas en la Estructura 1 del antiguo sitio maya de Nakbé, han aportado información nueva y valiosa sobre la naturaleza y la forma de la evolución arquitectónica de una construcción que en última instancia resultó ser el edificio dominante de ese sitio. La Estructura 1, que se eleva 48 metros por sobre el suelo del bosque, puso al descubierto secuencias arquitectónicas que se condicen con los datos de otras áreas del sitio. Las excavaciones sugieren que el arte arquitectónico prominente (mascarones y paneles), y la forma triádica de la arquitectura, que son rasgos característicos de las estructuras del Preclásico Tardío en el norte del Petén, no se encuentran antes del período Preclásico Tardío (ca. 300 a.C.). Esto sugiere que las esculturas arquitectónicas y las estructuras triádicas pasaron a ser un patrón común a través de la élite emergente, probablemente como propaganda teológica. Al menos nueve pisos de estuco del Preclásico Medio y Tardío se extendían por debajo de la última escalera de la Estructura 1, indicando que las estructuras más tempranas solían aparecer enterradas dentro del edificio. Las excavaciones subsiguientes demostraron que éste era el caso. Además, las evidencias de una actividad peculiar de antiguas excavaciones realizadas en las primeras estructuras a principios del período Preclásico Tardío (ca. 300 a.C.), sugieren la posibilidad de un entierro o una tumba intrusivos. Los datos han permitido poner a prueba un modelo de desarrollo de la evolución arquitectónica a través del examen detallado de las secuencias de construcción, las formas arquitectónicas, y los antecedentes de arte arquitectónico en una temprana estructura monumental maya.

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## **Introduction**

The circumscribed basin found in northern Guatemala, known as the Mirador Basin, is a region of archaeological sites of unusual size and architectural complexity. Archaeological excavations have demonstrated that many of the major sites in the Mirador Basin date to the Preclassic periods. However, the architectural sequences of the monumental architecture in the Mirador Basin have been difficult to understand because of the volume and scale of the ancient buildings. The largest structures in the Basin date to the Late Preclassic period (350 B.C.-A.D. 150), and are constructed in the "triadic architectural form," a large platform with three summit structures. The consistency of this architectural form is evident at the sites of El Mirador, Nakbé, Tintal and Wakná (Hansen, 1984; 1990; 1992a). Excavations at Nakbé indicate that the architecture dating to the earlier Middle Preclassic period (1000-350 B.C.), which has been located throughout the site, does not appear to have been built in the triadic form, nor does it have evidence of monumental architectural art. The lack of these features in earlier architecture at Nakbé suggests that the appearance of monumental constructions in terms of size and scale of the buildings, the appearance of architectural art, and the triadic architectural form were relatively sudden innovations. The developmental sequence as to when these features appeared, and the economic, political, and environmental conditions that accompanied these innovations could be detected archaeologically, providing that the site had sufficient antiquity. Such an emphasis would allow an opportunity to observe the organizational dynamics of the origins of Maya civilization from both diachronic (through time) and synchronic (within a point in time) perspectives. A proposal was submitted to the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc. (FAMSI) for the purpose of excavating Structure 1 at Nakbé to determine the architectural evolution of a building that was destined to become the dominant building structure at the site. Previous excavations indicated that the visible versions of the building dated to the early Late Preclassic period, and that major architectural art in the form of stone and stucco masks and panels decorated the facade of the building (Hansen, 1992a). The presence of a strong Middle Preclassic occupation at the site suggested that excavations inside Structure 1 could provide data related to the developmental sequence of the building from these earlier periods.

Excavations conducted during the 1990, 1991, 1996 and 1998 field seasons on Structure 1 and the subsequent laboratory analyses have provided important data relevant to the architectural sequences of monumental Preclassic architecture. Broad horizontal excavations at the base of the building and the placement of major tunnels in several axes of the building revealed that two latter architectural constructions of the facade were subject to impressive displays of architectural art, with monumental masks and panels flanking a broad stucco and stone staircase. The earlier construction of the facade was modified at least once as well. While two phases were evident for the construction of the present, visible form of the building, the central stairway revealed a sequence of at least five periods of staircase construction and renovation.

The large-scale architectural construction episodes on Structure 1 had buried significant earlier structures, indicating a sequence of the architectural constructions and a demonstrable pattern of architectural evolution that is consistent throughout the site.

## **Research Problem**

While sophisticated buildings are "the best index of the degree of complexity of social systems" (Sanders and Price, 1968:140; Price, 1982), the developmental sequence of Maya monumental structures and associated architectural art prior to the Late Preclassic period (300 B.C.-A.D. 150) has been less understood. Recent excavations at Nakbé, Guatemala ([Figure 1](#)) have shown that an architectural development began by about 1000 to 800 B.C. (Hansen, 1998), with large and complex structures appearing by the late Middle Preclassic period (ca. 600 B.C.-400 B.C.) (Hansen, 1992a; 1992b; 1992c; Forsyth, 1993a; 1993b). However, architectural art and a specific structural form (triadic architecture) were absent on known Middle Preclassic structures in the northern Petén. A similar absence of architectural art was noted on Middle Preclassic structures at Tikal (Laporte and Fialko, 1995) and Yaxuná (Freidel, personal communication, 1995), while a shallow relief art was found on a Middle Preclassic building at Río Azul (Valdez, 1995). Yet, excavations on Late Preclassic structures at Cerros (Freidel, 1981; 1986), El Mirador (Matheny, 1986; Howell and Copeland, 1989; Hansen, 1990), Nakbé (Hansen, 1992a; 1992b; 1992c; 1998), Uaxactún (Ricketson and Ricketson, 1937; Valdés, 1987; 1990; 1992; Laporte and Valdés, 1993), and Tikal (Coe, 1965; 1990; Miller, 1986; Laporte and Valdés, 1993) have shown that architectural art and triadic structures were fully developed by about 300 B.C. and continued throughout the remainder of Maya history. What were the factors responsible for the changes in architectural decoration, form, and size? What were the socio-political and ideological implications from the introduction of sculpture and triadic architectural form? If the hypotheses are correct that (1) architecture art and specified architectural forms were probably ideological expressions as theological propaganda by an emerging elite (Hansen, 1991b; 1992a; Martinez and Hansen, 1992), and (2) these manipulations appeared relatively quickly about 300 B.C. (ibid; E. Hansen *et al.*, 1995), when and in what format were these programs introduced into ancient Maya society? In order to probe these questions and test a model for the architectural development in the north Petén, a controlled excavation of minimal impact was needed to determine the

structural sequence of an early triadic building with architectural art and good probability of antecedent constructions. The opportunity to study these issues was found to exist at Nakbé, due to the antiquity of the occupation and the large-scale architectural development there.

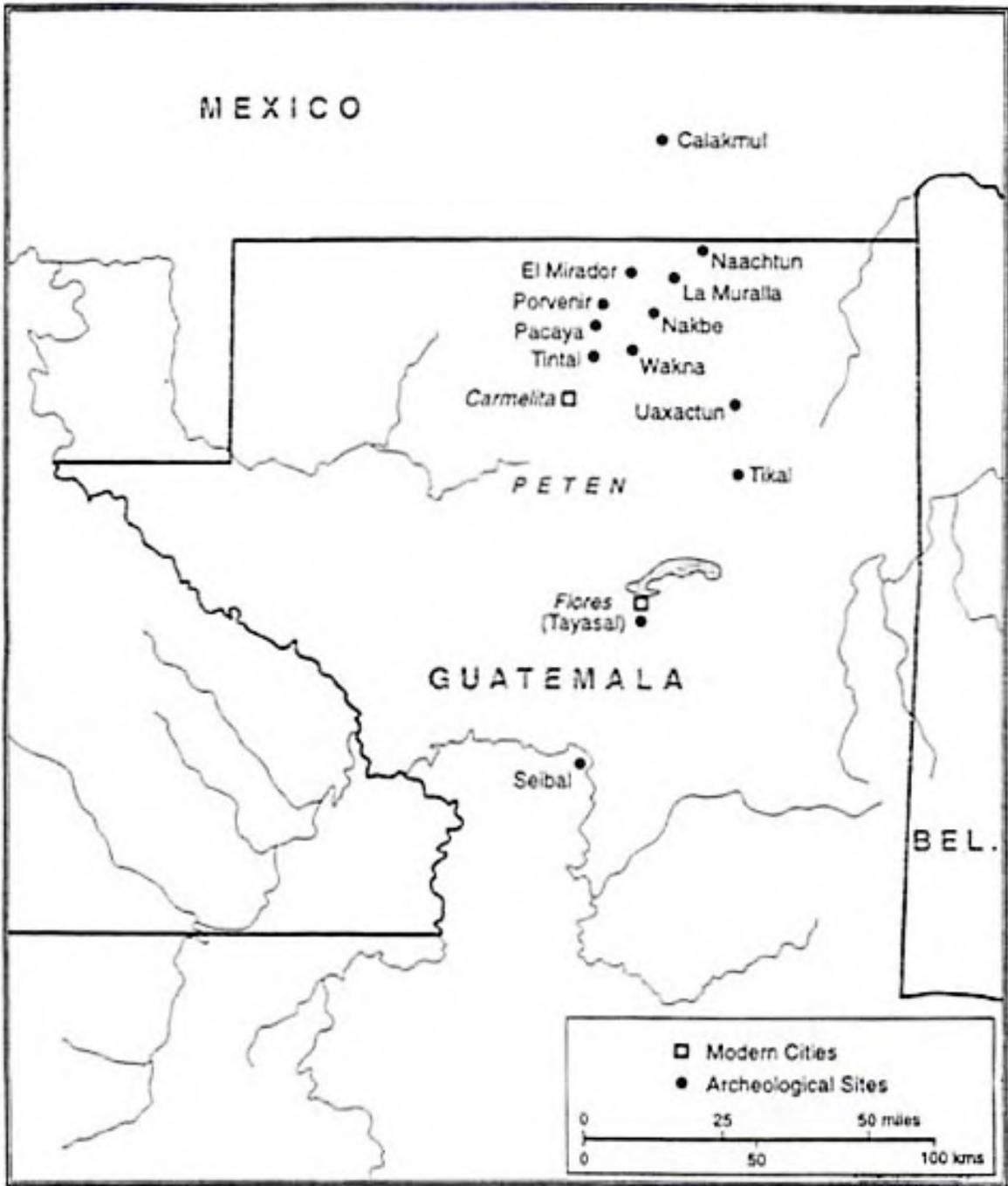


Figure 1. Petén, Guatemala, with some of the major sites in the area.

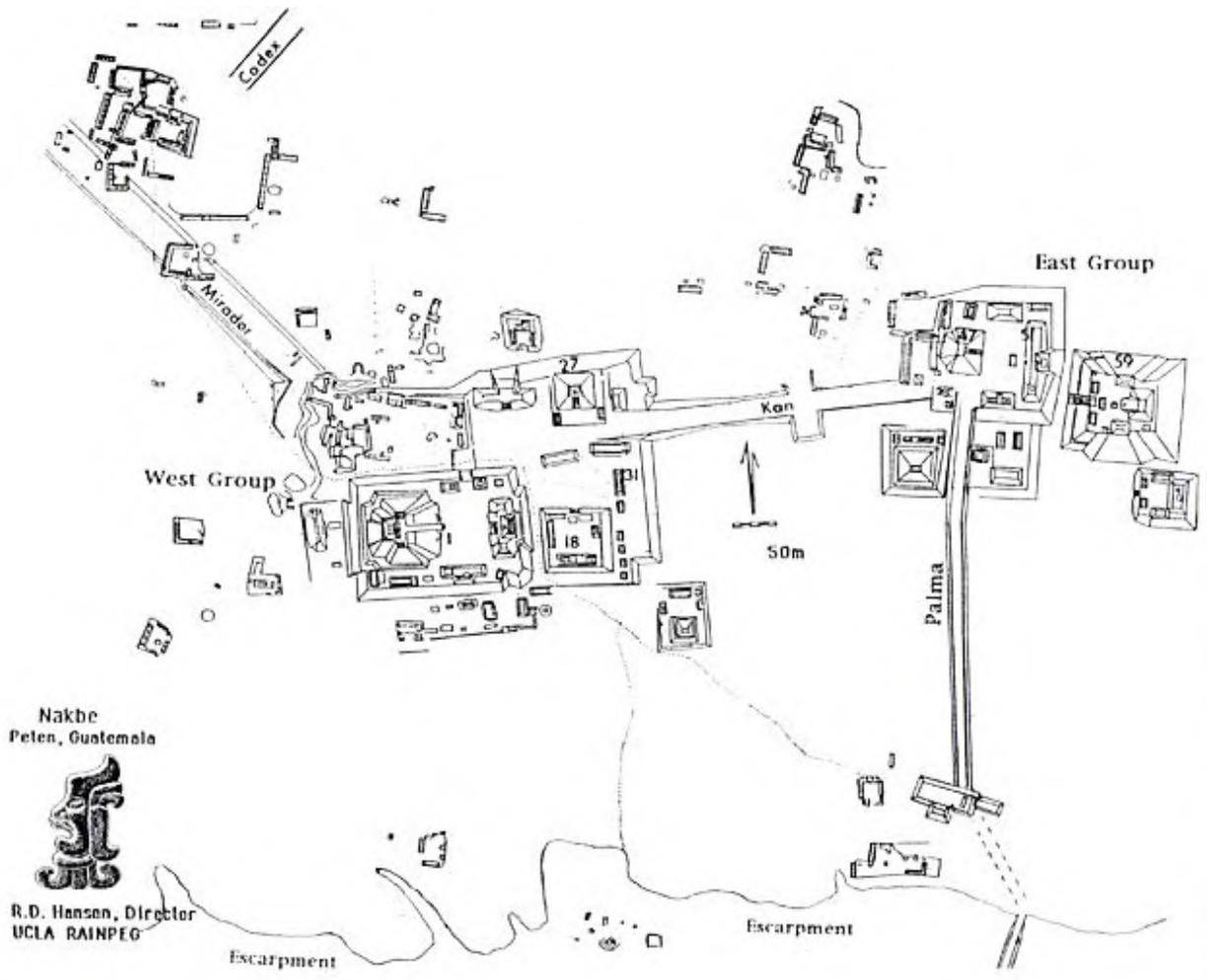


Figure 2. Plan of Nakbé.

## Investigation Setting

Structure 1 ([Figure 2](#)) is located in the Western Group of major architecture at Nakbé. The building was built in the triadic architectural form and rises 48 m above the forest floor. It rests on a Middle Preclassic platform about seven meters high ([Figure 3](#), shown below) in association with other Middle and Late Preclassic buildings.<sup>1</sup> The final visible

<sup>1</sup> Excavations of the central area of the plaza/platform (Operation 01 F) revealed at least three stucco floors near the surface, with the possibility of a later floor near the surface which had been completely eroded. Ceramics below the subsequent three floors were exclusively Middle Preclassic pottery, consisting of chamfered tecomates, Palma Daub type ceramics, and typical monochrome types. Excavations on Structure 04 by Gustavo Martinez indicated a Middle Preclassic construction date for this small building, while excavations and extensive tunnels directed by Hansen on Structure 13, located on the east side of the platform, revealed that the entire structure was built in a single episode in the Late Preclassic period. The consistent triadic format, the associated architectural art, consisting of badly damaged masks and panels (Hansen, 1992a), and the off-set entrances in the upper rooms of the

version of Structure 1 was erected during the early Late Preclassic period (ca. 300-200 B.C.).<sup>2</sup>



**Figure 3. Excavation of the Central Stairway of Structure 1. Note the successive staircases (Photo: FR Hillman).**

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building are standard architectural patterns for the Late Preclassic period. Additional structures on the platform (Str. 10, 11, 12) have not been tested.

<sup>2</sup> The antiquity of Structure 1 has been determined ceramically to date to the early Late Preclassic period. Ceramics from this period consist of labial flange bowls, small incurved rim, monochrome bowls, and waxy/semi-waxy red slips. The majority of the ceramics associated with the primary Late Preclassic populations at El Mirador and Nakbé consist of medial flange monochromes, pseudo-Usulután decoration, very large basin-type bowls, mushroom stands, waxy monochromes, unslipped striated jars, and other typical types of the Chicanel Ceramic Sphere. However, most of these typical types and forms from the Late Preclassic period were absent from the materials associated with the monumental masks and panels, leading me to suggest an early Late Preclassic date for the erection of the majority of the structure. The ceramics recovered directly on the floor in association with the last phase of construction indicates a slightly later Late Preclassic use. Extensive excavations at El Mirador and Nakbé have indicated the diachronic sequences and forms of Late Preclassic types and associated stratigraphy associations (e.g. Hansen and Forsyth, 1987; Hansen, 1990; Forsyth, 1989; 1993).



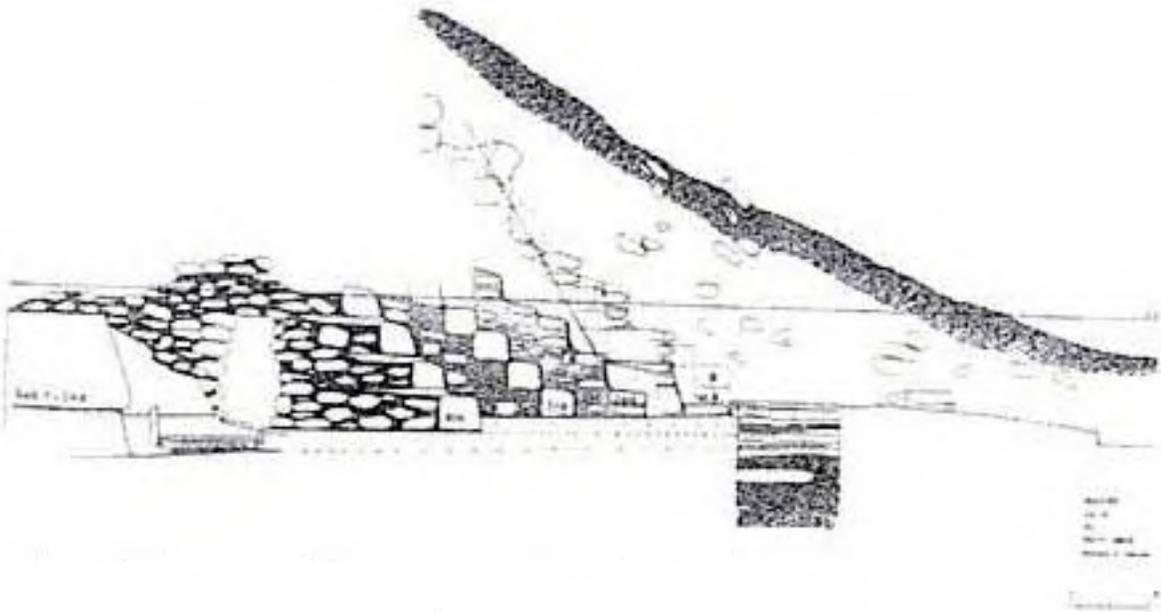
**Figure 4. Excavated portion of the mask on Structure 1, Nakbé.**



**Figure 5. Excavated portion of the nose and beak.**

Seven masks and panels (or portions of them) have been excavated on the building, including a mask 11 m wide and 5 m high depicting a bird image known as the Principal

Bird Deity (Hansen, 1992a) ([Figure 4](#) & [Figure 5](#)). Detailed stucco analyses of the art by the Getty Conservation Institute (E. Hansen *et al.*, 1995; 1997) show that it was created in a single, complex effort, although some modification of the original mask and panels included the covering of an earspool on the lower portions of the panels. Excavations also show that the three buildings of the triadic pattern on the summit were built in a single effort. However, five superimposed plaster floors dating to the Middle and Late Preclassic periods were known to extend into the interior of the structure ([Figure 6](#)) suggesting the probability of earlier, well-preserved buildings inside.



**Figure 6. Drawing of stairway and interior structures, Structure 1. Drawing by R. D. Hansen.**

Excavations in the well-stratified Middle Preclassic deposits at Nakbé have shown distinct features in the evolution of architectural construction techniques and structural form (Hansen, 1998). According to the data from Operations 47 A, 47 B, 48 A, 48 B, 49 A, 51 G, 51 H, 51 I, 51 K, 51 L, 51 M at Nakbé, the earliest forms of architecture, dating from ca. 1000-800 B.C. consisted of residential constructions consisting of low, wattle-and-daub houses with hard packed clay floors, perishable constructions with packed earth with post holes carved into bedrock, and elongated low walls with roughly hewn stones. The earliest monumental architecture at Nakbé (between 700 and 500 B.C.) consisted of vertical wall platforms, approximately two to three meters high, constructed with roughly hewn stones, and covered with a thin, crude, plaster. However, during the latter portions of the Middle Preclassic period (500-350 B.C.), radical architectural changes included the construction of platforms and walls with large, finely cut blocks, the introduction of apron moldings, a "conspicuous consumption" of limestone and lime plaster, and distinctive technology in the manufacture of stucco (Hansen, *ibid*).

The evolutionary pattern of architectural sequences at Nakbé has been determined by numerous excavations throughout the site. However, it was believed that the largest architectural complex at the site might be able to show a continuum of the constructional sequence, provide better preservation of buried features, and verify (or discredit) the sequence of architectural development that had been observed. For this reason, excavations in the form of tunnels through Structure 1 were thought to be the most productive, efficient, and most conservative methods of determining the architectural sequences and antecedent patterns of the largest structures at the site.

## **Proposed Methodology**

As part of the architectural study at Nakbé, a research design presented to the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc. (FAMSI) proposed that a tunnel be placed at the base of Structure 1 to identify the construction sequence of the building. Tunneling is the least expensive and least destructive form of investigation of the interior of major buildings (Sharer *et al.*, 1991:50), and has been successfully used at Tikal (Coe, 1965; 1990; Laporte and Fialko, 1995), Copán (Sharer *et al.*, 1989; Sharer *et al.*, 1991; Sharer *et al.*, 1992; Fash and Sharer, 1991; Fash *et al.*, 1992) and El Mirador (Hansen, 1990). Horizontal excavations of the last construction of the building and the series of tunnels to explore the architectural sequences were placed in February through April 1996 and again in February through April of 1998, under the supervision of Hansen and an experienced staff. The initial tunnel was located on the center line axis of the main, central stairway on the east facade of Structure 1, with lateral extensions to define interior and exterior features. However, parallel extensions of the tunnel into the structure are currently underway, and has allowed identification of the architectural features of some of the earliest monumental structures at the site. Total Station mapping technology was employed inside the tunnels by the mapping firm employed by the project (Equinox, Inc.) to precisely locate and record vertical and horizontal interior features of the structure.

Lot divisions were established according to geographical location, chronology, and, if within a consistent chronological period, according to "cell wall" constructions.

## **Architectural Details**

To date, twelve excavation operations (Operations 01 A-L) have been conducted on Structure 1 at Nakbé, forming an important body of data relevant to the construction and form of this early structure. These investigations were placed on both the upper platform of the building, the northern and southern corners, as well as the basal portion of the east facade.

The excavations of the upper platform indicated that the upper structures of the triad were constructed in a single effort. However, the central structure did have two staircases, constructed in the Late Preclassic period, with a poorly preserved stairway

added over a well-preserved, main staircase of the building ([Figure 3](#)). A tunnel placed by looters in 1990 through the central axis of the central building of the upper approximately eight meters below the summit located no burials or tombs. In addition, no burials were located in the north summit structure of Structure 1 which had also been tunneled by looters, and excavated, recorded and backfilled in 1990. The lack of tombs or burials in the summit triadic structures of large Preclassic buildings replicates a pattern previously observed at El Mirador and other triadic structures at Nakbé.<sup>3</sup> Excavations of the facades of the summit buildings at Nakbé, however, revealed the remains of five Preclassic masks and panels in poor condition.<sup>4</sup> Four of these masks and panels were on the eastern facade of the Central summit structure, while an additional panel was located on the North building. The construction of the masks and panels of the summit structures corresponds with the earliest floor of the upper platform, and no additional, interior facades were evident. The placement of illicit tunnel excavations in the Central and North structures of the triadic arrangement on the upper platform in 1990 and 1991 also revealed no interior buildings. This serves to indicate that the panels served both stairway construction phases and the three floors of the upper platform. It can be deduced from this that the construction of the summit buildings was primarily a single, monumental effort, and not a cumulative modification.

Three superimposed lime plaster floors were located on the summit platform, with the upper, badly damaged floor measuring 5 to 8 cm thick, while the second floor was extremely hard and in good preservation. This floor was placed on a layer of *sascab* (limestone marl) mixed with numerous chunks of polychrome stucco fragments. At a depth of 24 cm below the upper floor, a third, hard stucco floor was located which is directly associated with the panels portrayed the architectural art on the summit of the building. This thin, hard floor was placed directly on the rubble fill of the structure, and no earlier phases of construction were detected. Excavations into the fill ceased at 2.35 meters below the third, hard floor, and lateral extensions of the excavations into the fill of the platform extended across the base of the central stairway of the building. No detectable anomalies such as the foundation caches under the stairway of Preclassic structures in Alta Verapaz (Sharer and Sedat, 1987: Plate 3:34), or burials at the base of the central structure of the triad such as on the Late Classic structure of Caaná at Caracol were located.

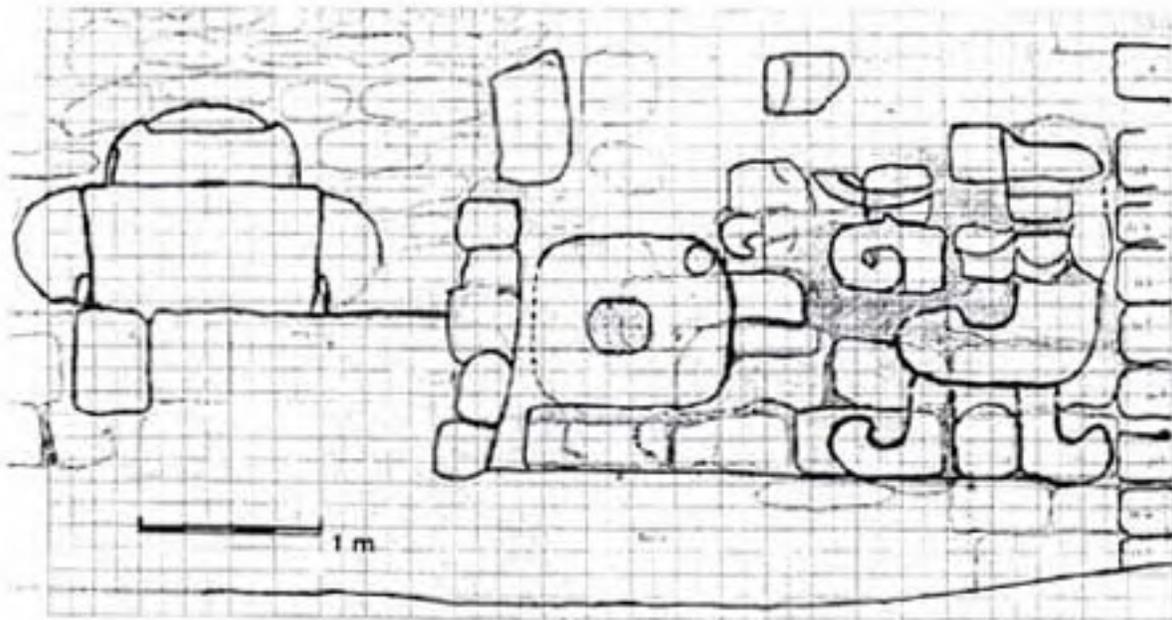
Excavations at the base of Structure 1 in 1991, 1992, and 1998 revealed that large masks and panels in good condition had been deliberately buried by subsequent masks and panels of the facade of the final construction phase of the building. It was during the early Late Preclassic period that architecture art appeared, forming deity portraits that flanked the central stairway of structures. These last masks and panels were in

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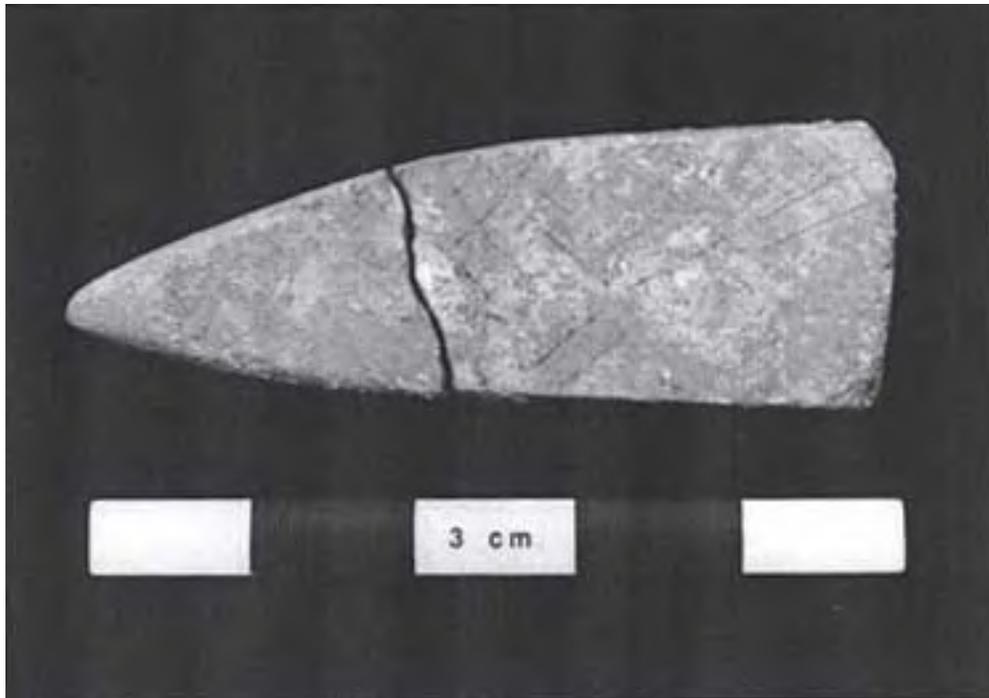
<sup>3</sup> Extensive excavations of the triadic structures of Monos, Danta, and Tigre pyramids at El Mirador, as well as Structures 13, 27 and 59 at Nakbé showed no evidence of burials associated with the triad architecture. Important major exceptions to this are the Preclassic tombs found in Structure 3 at Wakna, and the Classic burials found by Arlen and Diane Chase in Caan Ná at Caracol, and in Structure 5D-22 at Tikal. Excavations placed in the same locations as the those at Wakna and Caracol failed to locate burials, and any pattern for burial locations in triadic architecture cannot yet be reliably predicted.

<sup>4</sup> The poor condition is believed to be attributed in part to the fact that the summit faces east, the direction of predominant winds and storms.

extremely poor condition, with only small portions of the masks and panels still intact ([Figure 4](#)). The panels contained poorly preserved earspools carved out of the blocks with attached profile deity portraits, a down-turned "bird" deity beak, and a J-scroll and bracket motif attached to the end of the snout ([Figure 7](#), shown below). A bench was located at the base of the panels, and excavations in 1996 recovered a ceramic implement believed to be a modeling tool directly on the bench where the artisan left it after apparently breaking it ([Figure 8](#), shown below). The implement was curved and pointed, so as to fit precisely over the stucco scrolls that had been modeled over the stone armatures. In addition, the back side of the implement had what appears to be a very early glyph, perhaps a name or title of owner. The presence of this element is indicative of the early writing systems that had begun to appear during the Late Preclassic period in the Mirador Basin (e.g. Hansen, 1991a).



**Figure 7. Drawing of the last phase panel between mask and stairway, Operation 01 I, Nakbé.  
Drawing by R. D. Hansen.**



**Figure 8. A stucco finishing implement (with lime plaster still adhering to the face) found on the bench at the base of the panel.**

The interior or earlier masks and panels depicted the large ear spools, terrestrial and celestial elements in the panels, and profile deity replicas of the central image (Hansen, 1992a). The image is a deity portrait depicting the Principal Bird Deity (Bardawil, 1976; Cortez, 1986; Hansen, *ibid*; Kappelman, 1997), a supernatural protagonist identified in the Popol Vuh as well as sculpture and other examples of Mesoamerican art. This image forms a primordial symbol of power and authority to which incipient Lowland Maya elite could lay claim to or descendency from. The Popol Vuh mentions that the supreme deity of the previous era was a bird macaw known as Vucub Caquix, who was tricked and defeated by the Hero Twins of the story. In this manner, power was usurped and acquired by the defeat of the opponent. Often, Maya rulers appear to have imitated the avian characteristics of Vucub Caquix of the Popol Vuh which allowed them to inherit legal authority (Hansen, *ibid*; Kappelman, *ibid*).

In order to adequately evaluate the architectural sequence of Structure 1, it was deemed necessary to include an expanded horizontal study of the last construction phase of the structure to understand the iconography and variations in construction techniques, as well as relevant chronological information to help identify the architectural sequence of the building through tunnel excavations.

## **1996, 1998 Excavations: Structure 1**

### ***Introduction***

Excavations conducted during the 1996 and 1998 year were partially financed by the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc., (FAMSI), the Lannan Foundation, National Geographic Society, the Regents of the University of California-UCLA Institute of Geophysics and Planetary Physics, the Foundation for Anthropological Research and Environmental Studies (FARES), and numerous private and corporate donors. The excavations were designated Operation 01 I, 01 J, 01 K, and 01 L and were located on the south east facade of Structure 1 (01 I, 01 J, 01 L) and on the summit of Structure 1 (01 K). Horizontal excavations at the southeast base of the central stairway were placed with the northern edge of the trench near in the center of the staircase located in an area 14 m long (N-S), and 10.5 m wide (E-W). The eastern edge of the excavation was located 6 m out into the plaza from the base of the bench and stairway.

Excavation strategy was to conduct a horizontal exposure of the last visible version of the building, with detailed collections of the artifact materials in context with floors, benches, and stairs, and record any remaining architectural art. Block size and shape were recorded, and the important variations in block size and form appear to form a pattern of some reliability in the sequence of Preclassic architecture (Hansen, 1998). In addition to more adequate chronological information for the last visible phase of the building, data was sought relative to the function and utilization of the building in its various stages. This involved the placement of the tunnel. The development of specialist technologies, such as stone size and shape, stucco manufacture and use, and lime preparation methods were also important means of understanding the role of this structure in the broader sphere of ancient Maya culture.

The stairway was exposed to assist in the determination of architectural sequence. Subsequent tunnel excavations near the center-line axis revealed four consecutive stairways, indicating five phases of modification (the outer stairway had two episodes of construction: Str. 1 1st a, Str. 1 1st b), (see [Figure 6](#)). The summit structures revealed two principal stairway constructions with three floors, but only one construction sequence visible in the facade with at least two modifications. Variations in the form and composition of the stairways were striking, and indicate the differences in structural technology and the relative investment of labor in the construction of such a massive edifice. While five phases of modification were visible in the lower central stairway, only two major construction phases representing at least three modifications were visible in the facade of the building.

### ***Tunnel Excavations***

The latest stairway at the eastern base of Structure 1 consisted of limestone blocks, measuring .80 x .40 x .30 m., .73 x .32 x .35 m, and .72 x .27 x .35 placed in parallel,

lineal, Late Preclassic fashion. These stones had been placed on an earlier version of the same stairway so that what had previously been a tread, now became a riser. Each stairway phase had about the same size blocks. Exposure to the elements, trees, and probable stone robbing had severely damaged these steps, and their condition probably would not be conducive to restoration or consolidation measures.

The second interior steps (Str. 1 2nd) were found about 1.10 meters into the building. The fill between the first and second stairs had ceramics and two large chert cores with two large primary flakes were recovered from this material. In comparison to the previous steps and subsequent steps, these steps were radically different in construction form, consisting of smaller, rectangular stones measuring approximately .46 wide x .13 high x .60 m long and .38 wide x .15 high x .40 long m, placed in the tread of the steps with ample mortar between the stones. The stones and mortar had a thin layer of stucco .015 to .20 m thick applied over the steps.

The third steps (Str. 1 3rd) were found an additional .88 m into the building. The loose dark soil fill under the second stairway and on top of the third stairway consisted of an extremely rich deposit (Lot 72) of ceramics, lithics, carbon, and stucco fragments. These materials consisted of well-preserved Chicanel, Late Preclassic sherds, such as Alta Mira Fluted bowls, unslipped restricted neck vessels, and wide everted rims of plates with broad, pre-slip modelled grooves encircling the rim. This wealth of materials correspond to the wealth displayed in the size and form of the steps of this large-scale construction phase. The stones of this phase consist of massive blocks laid end to end, measuring .44 wide x .34 m high x .90 to 1.15 m long. The first step was placed directly on the third floor of the plaza level. The consistency of the size and scale of these stones suggest that political and economic organization resulted in a strong specialized production and construction period. It is believed that the earlier of the two major construction phases of the facade is associated with this stairway.

The earliest stairway apparently represented the major transition from smaller, more simplistic architecture to the large construction now visible. There were no earlier stairways encountered, and the dark brown mud tightly packed in stone and marl. This stairway had buried four superimposed structures which were encountered about seven meters in from the first stair. Each structure varied substantially from the previous building that had been buried by the subsequent architecture. This pattern replicated the known changes observed in other areas of the site.

The datum consisted of a sawed-off *ramon* tree trunk located in the approximate center of the excavation which had an elevation of 1.36 m above the natural surface level of the plaza. The excavation consisted of two excavation areas, Trench "a" (on the southern side of the area) which was placed to detect the presence of monumental masks (Lots 02, 03, 05, 06, 10, 11, 31-43). Trench "b" (on the north side) was placed to reveal the stairway (Lots 01, 07, 08, 09, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 51-63). These two excavation areas were partially divided by a 3.0 m wide unexcavated area which served as a control section. Trench "a" measured 3.5 m wide (north to south) and 9.5 m long (east-west), while Trench "b" measured 4.0 m wide (N-S) and 10.5 m long (E-W).

Trench "c" constituted the western section of the 3 meter wide unexcavated area to reveal the bench and panel of the last phase of the structure and join the "a" and "b" excavations of the facade and stairway (Lots 17, 18, 23b, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23a). The excavated area measured 3 m (N-S) by 5.5 m (E-W). Trench "d" was placed on the southern side of the large monumental mask that was found in Trench "a" and "c" so as to determine the size and extent of the mask and association with panel. The panel on the southern side of the mask was in poor condition, presumably the result of the intrusive roots of a large tree that must have grown there in the past.

The central stairway of the structure was exposed for 3.6 m from the southern edge of the stairway. The final version of the stairway was in extremely poor condition, apparently due to the exposure of the elements. The blocks along the southern side of the stairway were in somewhat better condition, and the sequence indicated that the final stairway consisted of a major construction and a modification, so that two episodes of construction were involved. The construction episode consisted of a large amount of fill which had been placed over an earlier stairway, followed by the placement of large blocks forming the treads and risers of the stairway (1-A, 2-A, 3-A, etc.) Modification of this stairway was minor in comparison to the major construction and included the adding of blocks to the existing treads, so that the tread became a riser and the riser became a tread (1-B, 2-B, 3-B, etc.).

Trench C, D.

Excavations of the last construction phase of the building revealed a soil and debitage deposit approximately 2.5 m deep.

### ***Significance***

Additional excavations on Structure 1 will define the architectural sequence of what ultimately became the dominant structure at a large early site. The sequence will allow a rare opportunity, at relatively low expense in spite of difficult logistics, to evaluate a model for the structural development, chronology, and cultural context of incipient monumental art and the triadic architectural form.

### **List of Figures**

[Figure 1](#). Petén, Guatemala, with some of the major sites in the area.

[Figure 2](#). Plan of Nakbé.

[Figure 3](#). Excavation of the Central Stairway of Structure 1. Note the successive staircases (Photo: FR Hillman).

[Figure 4](#). Excavated portion of the mask on Structure 1, Nakbé.

[Figure 5](#). Excavated portion of the nose and beak.

[Figure 6](#). Drawing of stairway and interior structures, Structure 1. Drawing by R. D. Hansen.

[Figure 7](#). Drawing of the last phase panel between mask and stairway, Operation 01 I, Nakbé. Drawing by R. D. Hansen.

[Figure 8](#). A stucco finishing implement (with lime plaster still adhering to the face) found on the bench at the base of the panel.

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