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Late Postclassic Shrine Complexes at El Naranjal, Quintana Roo, México

Research Year: 1999

Culture: Maya

Chronology: Late Post Classic

Location: Quintana Roo, México

Site: El Naranjal

Proyecto El Naranjal in northern Quintana Roo, México, provides a unique opportunity to understand a previously unrecognized aspect of Late Postclassic Maya landscape use, one that specifically involved the reoccupation of *abandoned* Classic-period centers and the ritual manipulation of sacred geographic features. Characteristically, the Late Postclassic was a time fraught with widespread political factionalism, land-tenure issues, and boundary disputes. This proposal contends that cultural environments, both built and natural, were physically altered and ritually reused by the ancient Maya as part of an ingenious resettlement strategy, aimed at mitigating intense competition for habitable land and unequal access to natural resources. It is believed this tactic also involved the reconfiguration of lineage histories to actively align displaced kin-based groups with newly occupied sites. A key component of this specialized approach incorporated a potent form of ancestor veneration centered on abandoned burial platforms, which were subsequently refurbished and reused following centuries of disuse. This cultural "revival" became the pivot of a redefined worldview intent on legitimizing site-title and rights of possession by empowering relocated lineages with an entirely neoteric patrimony and heritage. Reinterpreted histories were essentially contrived and as such, were precisely tailored to serve the immediate needs of recent emigrants. The anthropological ramifications of reoccupation extend well beyond the mere filling of a chronological gap in the archaeological history of the northern Maya Lowlands—into the anthropology of survival when competing cultures collide. This is a critical cultural response study of high significance to México's Pre-Columbian history that also exhibits direct implications for contemporary issues involving culture-conflict and the indigenous response to change, outside influence, and external pressure, which ultimately stimulate the development of specialized strategies to promote legacy and ensure survival.

With generous support from the Foundation for Mesoamerican Studies, Inc. (FAMSI), the National Science Foundation (NSF), and the University of California (UC MEXUS), I initiated a new program of research independent of the Yalahau Regional Human Ecology Project, one dedicated solely to the study of El Naranjal and its immediate

environs. In addition to substantiating the previously discussed proposal of ancestor veneration as a major factor in Late Postclassic site reuse, *Proyecto El Naranjal* seeks to address a number of other questions regarding the nature of structural reuse and the activities that sustained it. For instance, what additional factors may have prompted the recycling of El Naranjal and what might explain the evidence indicating ritual reuse? Is reuse limited to shrine-stairway-altar additions or do other categories of reuse exist? Can reuse be attributed to permanent reoccupation and if so, was reuse an *intentionally* devised settlement strategy for the Late Postclassic Maya? Finally, if not reoccupation, then may pilgrimage or some other periodic ritual activity explain the discrete reuse of ruined monumental architecture at El Naranjal?

The 1999 field season at El Naranjal began to address these questions of site reuse with the investigation of shrine-stairway-altar complexes that were added to ruined Early Classic platforms during the Late Postclassic. Preliminary results from this program of research provided new insight into the nature and purpose of these Late Postclassic architectural additions. Four of thirteen such complexes recorded at the site, seen on Structures 7, 9, 14, and 21, were investigated through a series of test excavations in front of shrine entrances, at the base of stairways, and adjacent to basal altars. Excavations revealed heavy concentrations of smashed *Chen Mul* modeled deity incensarios, broken feasting vessels, speleothem (cavestone), drilled stone beads, obsidian blades, and shell ornaments directly associated with the reuse of earlier architecture. This new data combined with previous archaeological research at the site allow a preliminary interpretation regarding the function and meaning of these shrine complexes at El Naranjal. The most significant of these interpretations and the one best supported by excavation data is that Structure 21 likely served as a water shrine in Late Postclassic rain ceremonies. Though less conclusive, other evidence suggests that Structures 7, 9, and 14 supported different types of lineage shrines that were likely used in ancestor veneration rites. Beyond these specific interpretations and in a broader sense, this information contributes to a deeper understanding of how these architectural additions fit into wider patterns of site reuse seen throughout the northern Maya Lowlands during the Late Postclassic.

Future research intends to investigate the proposal that shrine-stairway-altar complexes, the defining characteristic of architectural reuse at El Naranjal, played a critical role in Late Postclassic Maya ancestor veneration; principally, as mortuary shrines. Following Patricia McAnany (1995) and in this context, ancestral shrines served as the point of contact between deified deceased lineage heads (real or fictive) and living Maya descendants. In fact, we do know that these miniature shrines housed stone idols and ceramic effigies, and altars held offerings and incense burners, used in veneration rites associated with these architectural complexes added to ruined architecture. The frequency, location, and nature of Postclassic additions suggest a developed worship of spirits or deities related to the collapsed architecture on which these shrine complexes were built. Given the fact that many Classic Maya building mounds contain dynastic and/or lineage-related burials, and in light of the ancient Maya belief that pyramids are mountains and the home of ancestors, these venerated spirits were almost certainly ancestral in some form (likely perceived as lineage founders).

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