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Teotihuacán in the Puuc Region: Investigating an Early Foreign Presence at Chac II



Research Year: 2000

Culture: Maya

Chronology: Early Classic

Location: Yucatán, México

Site: Chac II in the Puuc Region

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Research

Archaeological research at Chac II (Chac) has revealed a major center in the heart of the Puuc region dating to the Early Classic period (A.D. 300-600) (Smyth *et al.*, 1998; Smyth, 1998; Smyth, in press a; in press b). These data are important to understanding the origins and process of urbanism in the Puuc hills region of SW Yucatán ([Figure 1](#)) and further contribute to resolving some of the region's long-standing problems of chronology. Indeed, architecture and ceramic evidence including numerous substructures and early style vessels correspond with early chronometrical dating of the site. These various lines of evidence indicate that Chac began to emerge in the Early Classic (A.D. 300-500), became a substantial settlement during the Middle Classic period (A.D. 500-650), and by the Late Classic (A.D. 650-800) covered up to 3 sq km with perhaps as many as 6000 inhabitants. The site appears to have become largely

depopulated by the onset of the Terminal Classic period (A.D. 800-1000) when settlement patterns shift to the nearby and neighboring center of Sayil.

In the summer of 2000, a program of vertical and horizontal excavation, mapping, and analysis took place at two residential groups west of the site's monumental core. The goal was to reconstruct residential patterns during the Early to Late Classic periods. In 1999 excavations began at the Platform Group, a residential platform about 200-m N of the Great Pyramid Plaza, while approximately 100-m W is the Sacta Group where investigations commenced this season. The Platform Group has yielded a large group of human burials with numerous complete vessels. Unusual mortuary patterns as well as vessel forms and decoration typical of Teotihuacán, including an extraordinary candelero and a cylinder tripod, suggested the possibility of a foreign group living at the site or perhaps significant long-distance interactions via Maya merchants with the central Mexican metropolis. Funding was received from FAMSI to expand excavation and analysis of residential platforms and burial remains to assess the nature of foreign contacts-interactions at Chac dating to the Early-Middle Classic periods (A.D. 300-650).

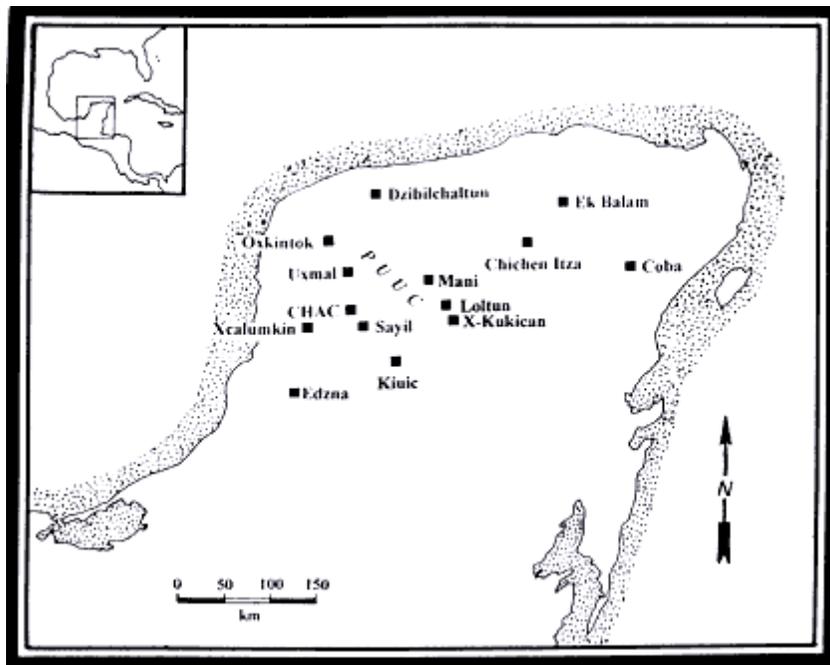


Figure 1. The Yucatán Peninsula showing the location of Chac and other major sites in Northern Yucatán.

There is now mounting evidence for significant foreign influences, contacts, or both in the Puuc region during the Middle Classic period; a time closely identified with Teotihuacán hegemony throughout greater Mesoamerica (see also Oxkintok: Rivera, 1989; 1990 in press; Varela, 1992; 1993; 1994). In 1999 at Chac, we found some of the earliest public buildings known for the Puuc region including an unprecedented pyramid

sub-structure located beneath the Great Pyramid with archaic stonework, yellow and red painted stucco, sloping wall–straight wall architecture, and a balustrade staircase. In 2000, we also located a larger intermediate pyramid encasing the pyramid sub with medium size rough-cut stonework (mini-megalithic), lateral staircases, and rounded E-W terrace walls and straight-walled N-S tiers. This pyramid shows the remains of tenoned stucco figures painted in various hues of dark green, golden-yellow, and red specular hematite. These color combinations are not typical of northern Maya mural painting and are more commonly associated with paintings from Teotihuacán. In addition, the finding of two early tenoned stone sculptures in the Pyramid Plaza, in addition to two others found previously, show a kind of serpent imagery unlike any in northern Yucatán preceding the Terminal Classic period. Were feathered serpents from Teotihuacán the inspiration for these unusual stone sculptures?

At the Platform Group ([Figure 2](#)), the room interiors of three stone foundations (braces) for perishable buildings (Structures 1, 2, and 3) were tested by excavation in 1999 and exposed horizontally in 2000. A round structure interpreted as a sweat bath and two additional foundation braces were also excavated. All surface structures are now dated to the Late Classic period. Horizontal exposures, however, revealed a substantial L-shaped substructure beneath Structures 1 and 2 showing the remains of multiple rooms, interior corridors, and a possible interior patio area with a relatively thick stucco floor and boulder wall foundation ([Figure 3a](#), [Figure 3b](#)). In fact, the lower building is oriented between 15 and 20 degrees E of N and incorporates residential features and a spatial arrangement resembling Teotihuacán apartment compounds.

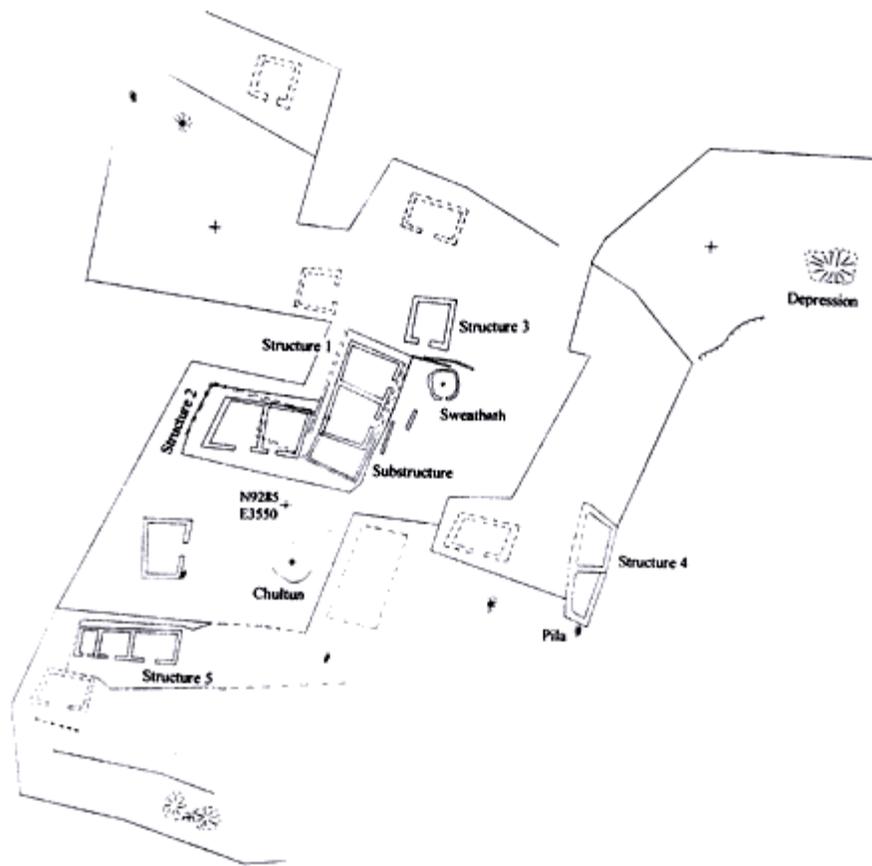


Figure 2. Plan map of the Platform Group showing the location of the early Substructure beneath Structures 1 and 2 and various other platform superstructures dating to the Late Classic period. Thirteen Early-Middle Classic burials were found within the Substructure and three additional Late Classic burials were recovered from Structure 5. A number of Teotihuacán-inspired artifacts were found from both contexts. North is at the top and the scale is 1: 400.



Figure 3a. Photo looking north of a horizontal trench showing the Substructure's interior and exterior walls and stucco floor surfaces.



Figure 3b. Photo looking west of horizontal exposure showing the Substructure's exterior walls and stucco floor surfaces.



Figure 3c. Photo looking north of the skeletal remains of Burial 13 which appears to have been interred in a seated position located in the SE portion of the Substructure.

Of the 12 human burials located in 1999 and 1 additional burial in 2000 (totaling 13), all were found sealed below the substructure's stucco floor and therefore must date to the Early-Middle Classic periods ([Figure 3c](#)). Most if not all burials were primary and were interred in a seated or tightly flexed position within circular stone-lined crypts perhaps as part of burial bundles. Skeletal analysis of 9 individuals with preserved diagnostic attributes identified 5 adult males, 3 adult females, and 1 adult whose sex is indeterminate (Tiesler, 2000). The male individuals appear very robust suggesting physically demanding labor; one male survived severe cranial trauma. Several individuals show dental mutilation and cranial deformation suggesting relatively high rank (Tiesler, 1999). Based on trace element analysis, one male individual (and perhaps one female) showed a divergent nutritional pattern suggesting an origin outside Puuc region and perhaps even outside the Maya area. The complex mortuary patterns of multiple floor burials, small oval-circular crypt chambers, seated body positions, and non-Maya artifactual offerings point to significant contacts from outside the region. Many of these mortuary patterns are similar to those identified at the Gulf Coast center of Matacapan (Mound 61) where Teotihuacanos are argued to have been living at the site in Middle Classic times (A.D. 450-650) (Santley *et al.*, 1985; Santley, 1989:136).

Pyrite mirror fragments and red cinnabar are among the burial interments recovered that are untypical for the northern Maya area. Of the nearly 28 complete ceramic vessels recovered, most were early slate wares found in clear association with polychrome sherds (including Dos Arroyos polychromes) and orange-ware bichrome

vessels stylistically dated to the Early Classic. Virtually all vessels were stucco-coated with many showing resist painting, decorative techniques typical of Teotihuacán. Importantly, one slate ware vessel exhibits a stylized image of a fanged deity with a flowing headdress and goggle-eyes closely resembling the central México storm god (Tlaloc?) ([Figure 4a](#)). This image was painted on the bottom of a tripod dish in red specular hematite paint. Another unusual vessel is an incised thin-walled black-ware (Ekpedz incised) cylindrical vase with an out-flaring rim emulating florero-like vessel forms from Teotihuacán ([Figure 4a](#)). Also, fragments of three bifacial projectile points from atlatl darts were recovered from early contexts within the substructure. These points are similar to a complete atlatl biface made from silver-green obsidian radiocarbon dated to A.D. 620 retrieved from a ceremonial offering within the Great Pyramid Plaza in 1996.



Figure 4a. Photo of the Teotihuacán-style vessels from the Platform Group. Looking clockwise left to right shows an early slateware tripod dish with a storm god (Tlaloc?) image painted in red specular hematite paint, a blackware cylinder tripod with nubbin supports, a florero-like cylinder vase with an outflaring rim, and a black-on-orange single-hole candelero depicting a Maya-style temple. The scale is 13 cm.



Figure 4c. Photo of a Mayanized rendering of a Teotihuacán-style single-hole candelero with black and brown-on-orange decoration showing a slightly battered upper façade, a three-part cornice molding, and sloping lower walls with a projecting basal molding. This unique piece was completely stucco coated and shows evidence of burning on the inside directly beneath the hole opening.

A stucco-coated black and brown-on-orange single-hole candelero (a ceramic receptacle for apparently burning incense) in the form of a Maya temple with a three-part cornice molding and sloping lower wall was found in a substructure burial ([Figure 4c](#)). Although, it has been suggested that this ceramic receptacle is a *venenera*—a folk classification reserved for rare group of miniature vessels whose function is unknown—this classification is dubious for the following reasons. First, similar square, smooth surface candeleros and even modeled candeleros have been found in burial contexts dating to the Early-Middle Classic both in central México, Veracruz, and the Maya area (Gamio, 1922; Linne, 1934; Kidder *et al.*, 1946; Muller, 1978; Santley, 1989:137; Sempowski and Spence, 1994; Zabé, 1999:22). Second, inside the single-holed candelero from Chac directly below the vessel opening are dark, patchy areas beneath a stucco coating that appears to be residue from burning (copal incense?). Although a chemical analysis of this residue is pending, the most likely conclusion is that these miniature vessels found at selected sites in the northern Maya area are candeleros that were manufactured and imported from Teotihuacán or Mayanized renderings of this distinctive central Mexican culture diagnostic.

Five small ceramic receptacles called poison bottles (*veneneras*) were directly associated with 5 early burials. All are oval shaped, with annular supports, straight walled necks, direct rims, and smoothly finished surfaces decorated with red resist-painted circles, small applique knobs along their sides, and perforations at the base for suspension by a small cord or string likely from around the neck. Traditionally interpreted as receptacles for anti-venom for snakebites or as bottles for perfume or fragrances, these identifications are highly unlikely. What we know for sure, however, is that they are burial offerings and may have been portable incense burners since burned residue appears on the bottom of two burial bottles. Long-distance traders may have employed these items as objects for personal ritual as part of a merchant's traveling gear. Bishop Landa, for example, speaks of the nightly rituals of traveling merchants involving the burning of small amounts of incense offered to Ek Chuah, the Postclassic God of merchants and travelers (Tozzer, 1941:107). Karl Taube (1992:80) has argued convincingly that during the Classic period God L was regarded as a form of merchant god in Western Yucatán often appearing with merchant bundles and accompanied by the exotic quetzal or other long-feathered birds. God L figures, for instance, appear on two similar ceramic bottles believed to be from Honduras and Guatemala (Anton, 1970:plate 48 and figure 56). Also, the absence of status (vaulted) architecture at this large platform with its substantial substructure near the center of the site is certainly unusual. Together with the skeletal remains of cranial deformation, tooth mutilation, physically rigorous and sometimes dangerous activity (head trauma), one gets the impression of an economic group of long-distance traders at Chac with little actual political power engaged in hazardous duty perhaps on behest of powerful overlords both local and abroad.



Figure 3e. Photo of Burial 14 from Structure 5, Room 3 of the Platform Group. This burial appears to have been interred in a flexed position on its left side.

In 2000, excavations produced three additional human burials (14, 15, and 16) within the room interiors of a three-room foundation brace building (Structure 5) located on the extreme south of the Platform Group. Judging from the building's stonework and ceramics recovered, all burials appear to date to the Late Classic period and were interred in flexed but not seated positions as part of burial bundles—strands of cotton fiber were found in Burial 14 ([Figure 3e](#)). However, a nearly complete black ware cylinder tripod with nubbin supports showing typical Teotihuacán-style decoration such as a lower zone of decoration of alternating triangles and punctate design with small skull-like appliques set on the triangle corners ([Figure 4b](#)). Also, a fine-orange tripod plate fragment with hollow rattle supports and mica inclusions resembles ceramic type 30 from Matacapán, a Fine Buff ware dated to the Middle Classic period. In fact, these vessels appear to be heirlooms since they were not directly associated with any burial and were recovered from two separate rooms. These heirloom vessels must have been curated long before being intentionally broken and deposited with two of the building's rooms.



Figure 4b. Photo of the Teotihuacán-style blackware cylinder tripod with nubbin supports showing incised decoration in the form of triangular elements with zones of punctate and tiny skull-like appliques.



Figure 4d. Photo of a polychrome dish from Campeche with false Maya glyphs and sunburst motif.



Figure 4e. Photo of a fine orange tripod dish with hematite or mica inclusions (from Maticapan, Tuxtla, Veracruz?) with an interior incised decoration showing a styled partial skull in left profile set within a series of incised lines representing a background perhaps symbolizing the sun.

Also in 2000, excavations were begun at another substantial platform with two visible foundation brace structures located atop a high hill west of the Great Pyramid. Dubbed the Sacta Group, the east room of a two-room foundation brace (Structure 1) located near the platform's east edge was tested by excavation ([Figure 5](#)). Beneath two distinct stucco floors was a clear substructure with a third heavy stucco floor, a curving boulder masonry wall, and two stucco-lined pits or basins. The larger basin to the east contained three circular stone cysts and the remains of up to three burials with numerous partial vessels dated to the Early-Middle Classic period. A Chochola polychrome bowl from Campeche shows false and/or stylized Maya glyphs around the rim and a brilliant interior sunburst decoration. In association was an extraordinarily well-preserved subadult burial (Burial 3) interred in a flexed position lying on its right side ([Figure 3d](#)). These remains suggest a ritual sacrifice and not simply a formal burial indicating that the Sacta Group substructure served a special ceremonial purpose and not a strictly residential function during the Early-Middle Classic periods. Future work at this group is needed to help to resolve these significant interpretive issues.



Figure 3d. Photo looking south of the burial remains of a fairly well preserved sub-adult in a flexed position resting on the right side within the Substructure's stucco-lined depression at the Sacta Group.

The skeletal remains from the Platform and Sacta Groups are currently undergoing osteological analysis by Dr. Vera Tiesler of the Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán. Trace element analysis is underway as well being conducted by Quimico Samuel Tejada Vega of the Instituto Nacional de Investigaciones Nucleares in México. The results will be reported to FAMSI upon completion of the analysis. Ten radiocarbon samples submitted to Data Analytic Inc. for dating analysis is also in progress and should be completed before the end of 2000.

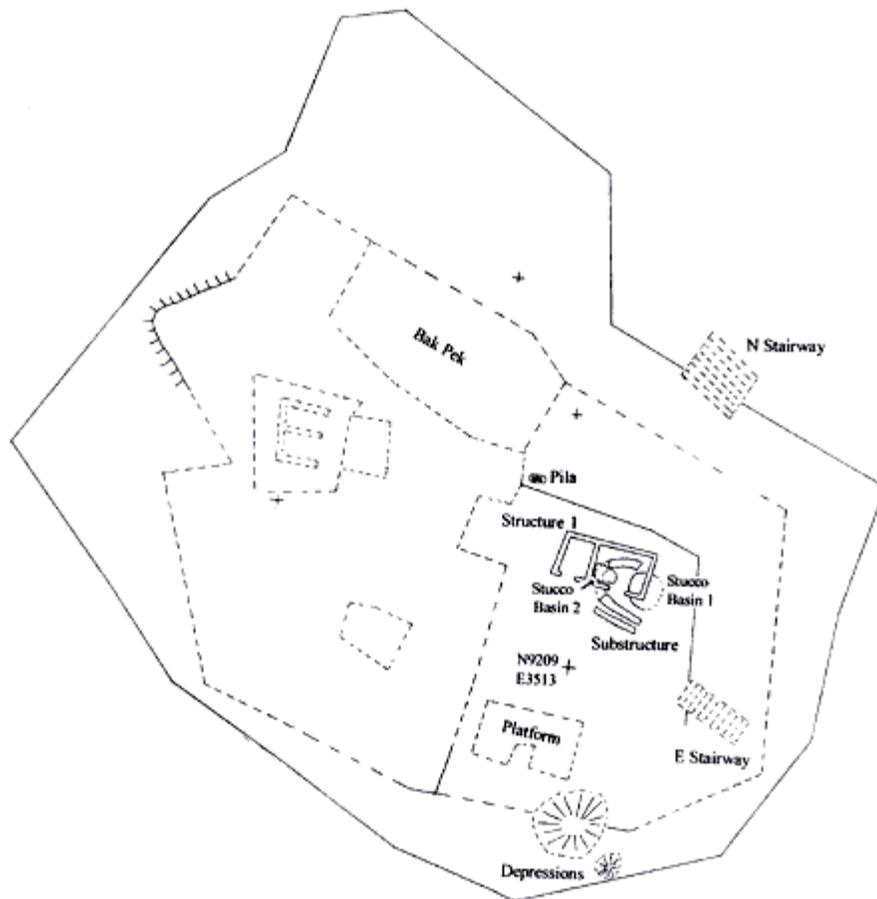


Figure 5. Plan map of the Sacta Group showing the location of the early Substructure and stucco-line depressions beneath Structure 1 and various other superstructures. Three Early-Middle Classic burials were found within the Substructure's south depression. North is at the top and scale is 1: 300.

The recent data gathered at Chac strongly suggest a relationship with central México that went beyond mere long-distance influence. Excavations at the Platform Group, in particular, have produced a large number of burials from early substructures, unusual mortuary patterns, and early style vessels and other material remains showing affinities to Teotihuacán. The finding of artifacts as culture specific and emblematic of Teotihuacán as a candelero, cylinder tripod, and atlatl points suggests a significant level of cultural interaction including the presence of foreigners at the site. Although burial practices in the Puuc region are not well known, especially during the early periods, the evidence presented within continues to support the possibility of resident foreigners at Chac. These findings raise new questions regarding the role of outsiders in the evolution of urban centers in the Puuc region. Indeed, the possible role of merchants adds another dimension to the complex nature of foreign relations among the Puuc Maya that has not been given serious attention requiring a fresh new look at long-standing questions and the pursuit of new avenues of inquiry. Those working in northern Yucatán should re-examine data for influence from central Mexico and elsewhere during

the Early-Middle and Late Classic periods to determine if such influence was widespread or confined to certain strategic locations.

The work at Chac demonstrates the site to be significant for better understanding the early prehistory of the Puuc region. The site holds great promise for addressing the nature of cultural links between the Puuc region and the rest of Mesoamerica during the Early-Middle Classic periods, a time of strategic importance to the development of northern Maya urbanism and the rise of complex societies in Yucatán. Clearly, the internationalization of the Yucatán began long before the Terminal Classic period, a realization that should not come at any great surprise since Mesoamerica was a complex, interacting culture area since Formative times. Collectively, these new data have the potential to transform understanding of the archaeology of northern Yucatán and shed new light on Classic period Mesoamerica.

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