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## **Revisiting the Xunantunich Palace: The 2003 Excavations**



**Research Year:** 2003

**Culture:** Maya

**Chronology:** Late Classic

**Location:** Belize

**Site:** Xunantunich

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## **Abstract**

The Xunantunich Archaeological Project (1991-1997) excavated significant portions of the palace complex, including the ruler's residence and adjacent structures. In 2003, the Xunantunich Palace Excavations program continued clearing the frontal terrace and lower building of Str. A-11, the ruler's residence. This report synthesizes those two sets of data, with a focus on results of the most recent excavations. I use the data to reconstruct the occupation history of the palace and changes in access patterns and use of different structures. This in turn illuminates Xunantunich's changing political organization. The palace complex's simple layout and absence of features like a royal throne suggest that it housed an abbreviated elite court, politically dependent on another polity, likely Naranjo. The palace's location at the cosmologically powerful northern edge of the site associated its residents with revered ancestors and the celestial realm, and the palace's built environment created a series of architectural spaces that structured interaction between the polity's residents and its ruling elite. Increasing restrictions to the ruling family over time reflects ideological changes that distanced ruler from subject, a trend paralleled elsewhere at the site. Roughly 75 years before the abandonment of Xunantunich, the palace's residents vacated the complex, and it was partially dismantled, indicating a radical shift in rulership at the site.

## **Resumen**

Durante el Proyecto Arqueológico de Xunantunich, *Xunantunich Archaeological Project* (1991-1997) se realizaron investigaciones en el complejo palaciego de Xunantunich, excavando un área amplia del palacio, que incluye la residencia de la familia gobernante de la ciudad y estructuras asociadas. En el año 2003, el programa "Excavaciones del Palacio Xunantunich", llevado a cabo bajo los auspicios del Proyecto de Desarrollo de Turismo, (*Tourism Development Project*) del Gobierno de Belice, dirigido por los Drs. Jaime Awe y Alan Moore, dio continuación a las excavaciones anteriores con el fin de revelar completamente el edificio inferior y la terraza frontal de la residencia del gobernante del sitio. Este informe presenta un breve resumen de los datos proporcionados por los dos proyectos, con énfasis en el trabajo más reciente. Los datos arqueológicos permiten una reconstrucción de la historia de ocupación del complejo palaciego, desde su fundación en la parte temprana de la fase Hats' Chaak (670-780 d.C.) hasta su abandono en la fase Tsak' (780-890 d.C.). Una aproximación más detallada de la evolución de los espacios del palacio y las actividades asociadas con ellos indica cambios importantes en el acceso al palacio y sus residentes, los cuales reflejan la historia política de la ciudad. El complejo palaciego de Xunantunich presenta una forma arquitectónica bien sencilla, sin evidencia de crecimiento

significativo de sus estructuras. Este hecho, más otras observaciones como la ausencia de un trono y la ausencia de evidencia de producción artesanal asociada con el palacio, sugiere que el complejo no servía como la sede de una corte real, sino de una corte abreviada o troncada, la cual dependía de los reyes de otro reino, posiblemente Naranjo. La ubicación del palacio en el extremo norte del sitio señalaba la asociación de sus habitantes con antepasados sagrados y la zona celestial del cosmos. La arquitectura del palacio formó una serie de espacios que restringía y dirigía el acceso a la corte y el contacto con sus habitantes, definiendo así las interacciones entre el líder del sitio y sus sujetos. Con el tiempo, el acceso al líder se iba restringiendo cada vez más, sugiriendo cambios ideológicos que se ven en otras zonas del sitio de igual forma. El complejo palaciego se dismanteló y se abandonó, pero unos 75 años antes del abandono de otras zonas del sitio, hecho que sugiere que su abandono indica unos cambios significativos en la organización política de la ciudad.

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## **Introduction**

The Maya royal court has proven to be a stimulating and fruitful area of research in recent years. The Maya palace has been recast in terms of the various agents who peopled the Maya court, the power negotiations inherent to the court, and the social dynamics of the interactions among nobles and between nobles and commoners that occurred in Maya palaces (see chapters in Christie 2003; Inomata and Houston 2001a, 2001b; Miller and Martin 2004). The Xunantunich Palace Excavations (XPE) program undertook a season of investigations at the site's palace compound in the summer of 2003 in order to examine changes in the nature of political authority and legitimacy at Xunantunich as reflected in the built environment and the way architectural spaces organized court activities, especially interactions between the ruling family and other members of the Xunantunich polity.

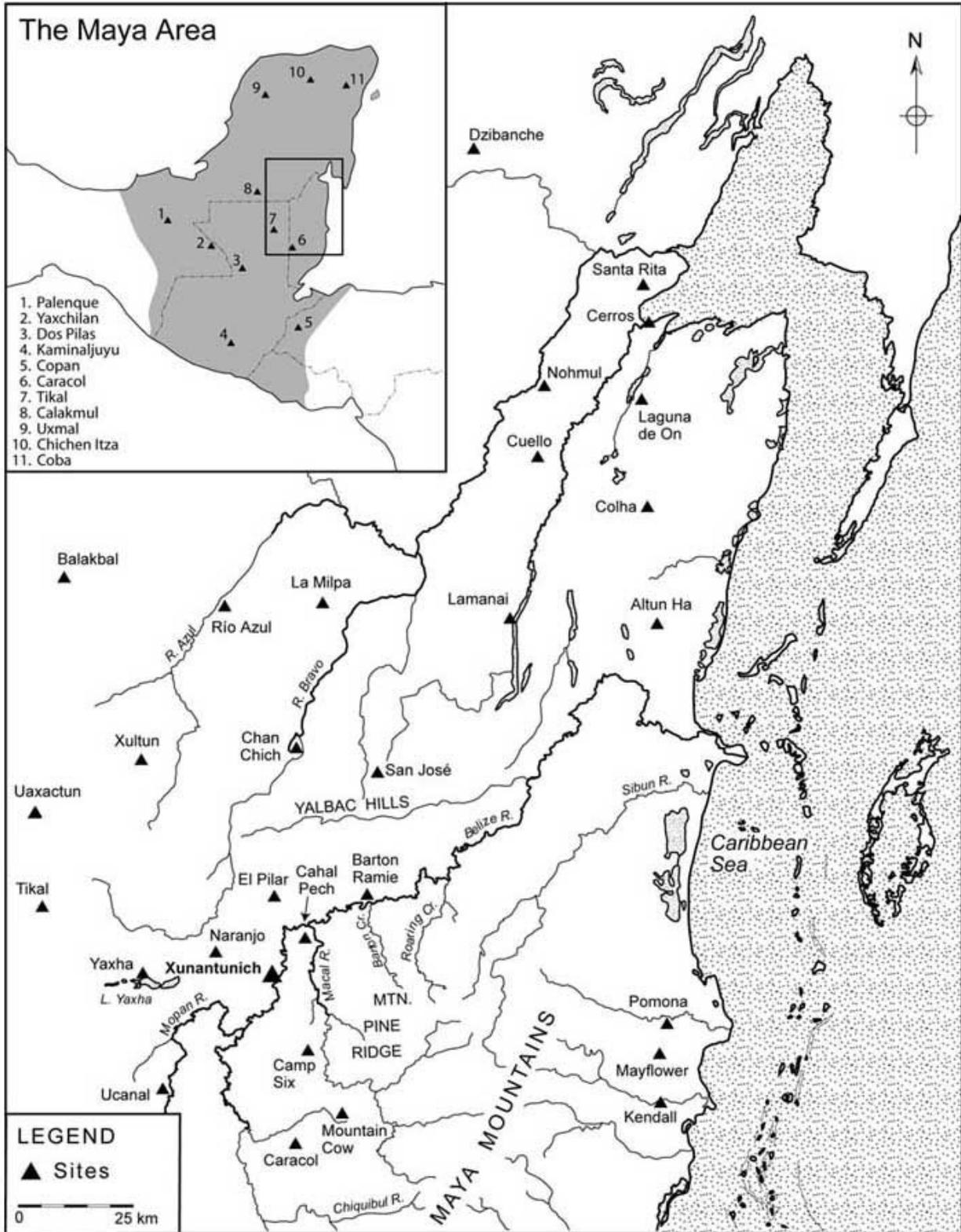


Figure 1. Archaeological sites in northern Belize and adjacent regions.

## Xunantunich and the Upper Belize River Valley

Xunantunich overlooks the fertile floodplain of the Mopan River in western Belize, dominating visually the Mopan valley in the same way that the site's rulers once dominated the region politically ([Figure 1](#)). Seven seasons of survey and excavation in and around Xunantunich by the Xunantunich Archaeological Project (XAP), directed by Richard M. Leventhal and Wendy Ashmore (2004; LeCount *et al.* 2002), confirmed that Xunantunich rose to political prominence relatively late in the history of the upper Belize River valley. Despite some earlier occupation, the site as it existed in the Late and Terminal Classic periods was founded around the beginning of the Late Classic period, during the Samal phase (A.D. 600-670; see LeCount *et al.* 2002 for the site's chronology) and then expanded rapidly during the following Hats' Chaak phase (A.D. 670-780).

The founding and early growth of Xunantunich occurred within a political landscape characterized by powerful competing polities (Leventhal and Ashmore 2004; LeCount and Yaeger 2003). As can be appreciated on [Figure 2](#), the landscape was densely packed with centers like Arenal (Taschek and Ball 1999), Buenavista (Ball and Taschek 1991, 2001, 2004), Cahal Pech (Awe 1992; Healy, Cheetham, *et al.* 2004), Baking Pot (Audet and Awe 2004), El Pilar (Ford and Fedick 1992), and Pacbitun (Healy 1990; Healy *et al.* 2004), powerful Classic-period polities that had deep historical roots and thus were presumably strongly embedded in local social, political, and ideological institutions (NB: Taschek and Ball [2004] argue that Xunantunich, Buenavista, and Cahal Pech were functionally differentiated sites within a single polity). Thus it is interesting that the powerful kingdom of Naranjo appears to have been linked closely to Xunantunich's rapid Hats' Chaak growth. The upper Belize River valley's rich alluvial soils and its strategic location along the main route for Petén-bound canoe traffic from the Caribbean likely account for the efforts of the Naranjo ajawo'ob to control this area, indirectly or directly, especially during the reign of K'ak' Tiliw (Ashmore 1998; Awe, personal communication 2002; Audet and Awe 2004; Ball and Taschek 1991; Houston *et al.* 1992; LeCount and Yaeger 2003; Taschek and Ball 1992).

It remains unclear as to whether Naranjo's relationship with Xunantunich entailed the insertion of a cadet lineage or other noble family from Naranjo to rule the site, foreign support of a loyal local elite family, or some other mechanism. Regardless of the details, the rulers at Xunantunich still had to establish and legitimate their place in the local socio-political context of the upper Belize River valley (Ashmore 1998; Yaeger 2004). The site itself testifies to their success: the labor required to complete the ambitious Hats' Chaak building programs and the rapid pace of construction demonstrate that the rulers controlled labor from a relatively large area. The rapid increase of the power of the rulers of Xunantunich raises interesting and important questions about the polity's political organization and the nature of authority and legitimacy at Xunantunich and other medium-sized Maya centers. The architectural and artifactual data from the palace compound at Xunantunich help document the changing political organization of Xunantunich over the course of the Late and Terminal Classic periods and the ways in which political authority was legitimated.

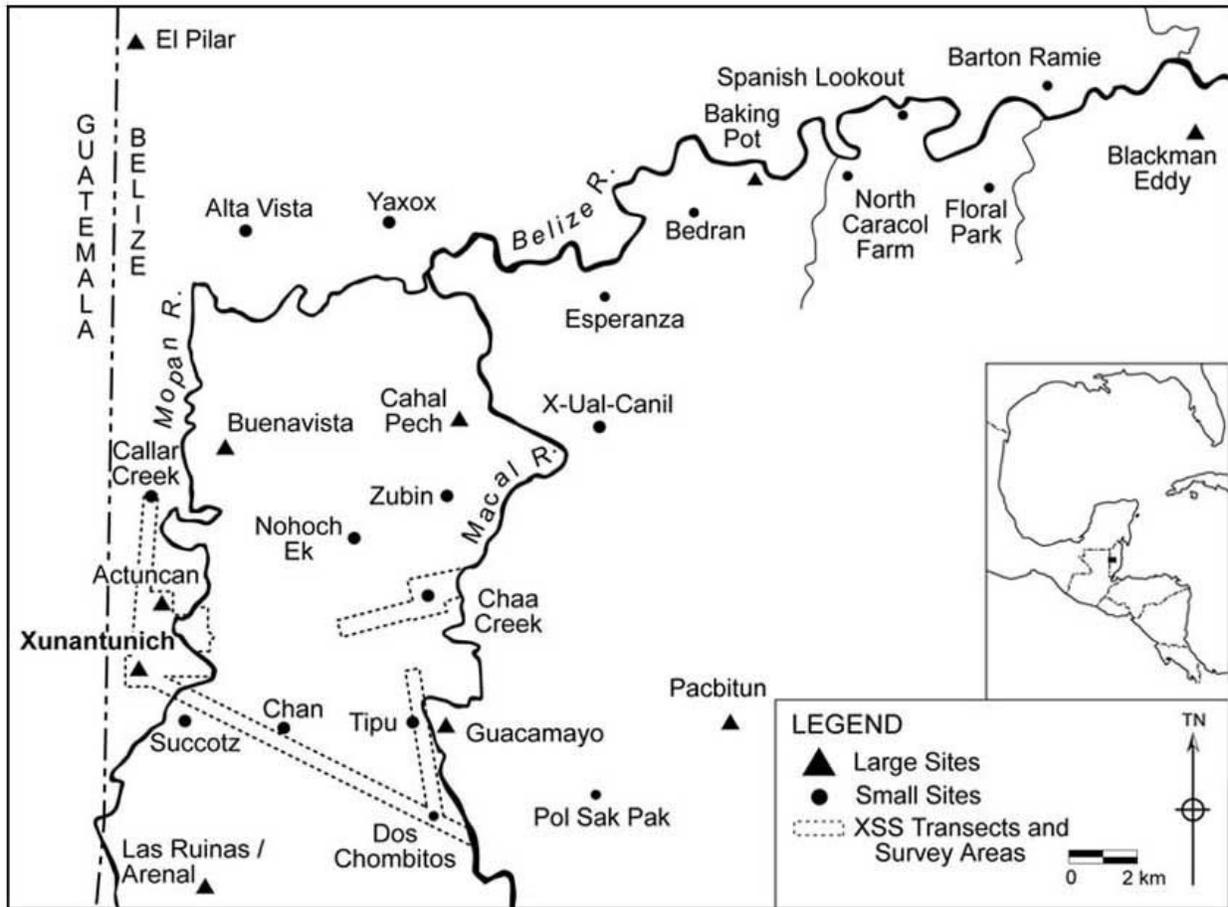


Figure 2. The upper Belize River valley.

### Excavations in the Xunantunich Palace

The Xunantunich palace consists of four structures focused around Plaza A-III, as well as an ancillary complex immediately to the east (Figure 3 and Figure 4). Excavations in Plaza A-III began with the expedition by Thomas Gann (1925) in 1924. Later more focused investigations were led by Euan MacKie (1961, 1985) in 1959-1960 and, later, by investigators from the Belize Department of Archaeology through 1980s. XAP instituted a systematic program to understand the complex in 1994 (Harrison 1996; Jamison and Wolff 1994; Yaeger 1997), focusing on Strs. A-11 and A-12. Finally, in 2002 and 2003, the Belize government's Tourism Development Project, directed by Jaime Awe and Allan Moore, undertook the excavation and consolidation of the south face of the massive Plaza A-III substructure and the southern stairway leading up to Str. A-13. This previous work set the stage for the 2003 Xunantunich Palace Excavations.

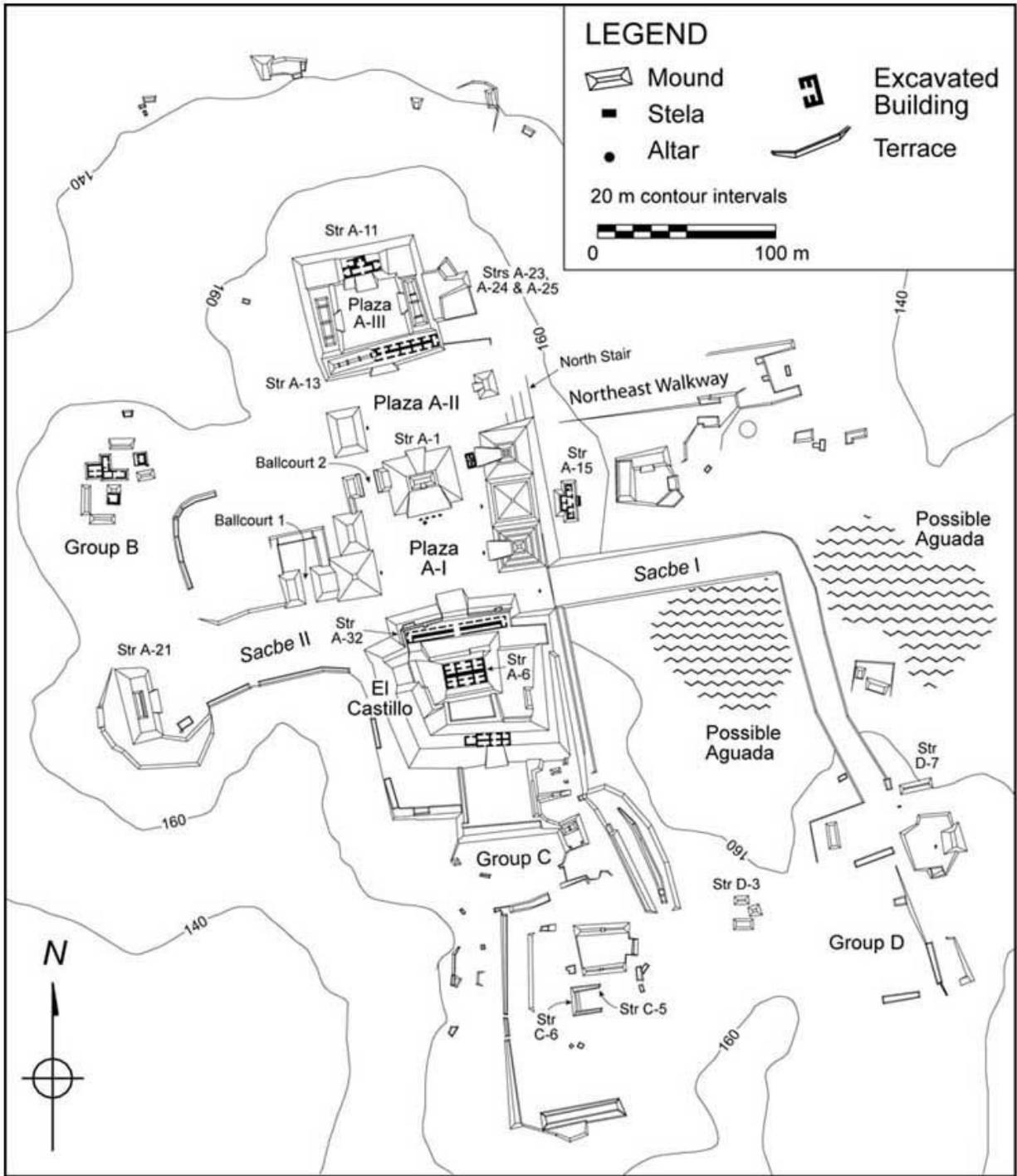


Figure 3. Xunantunich.

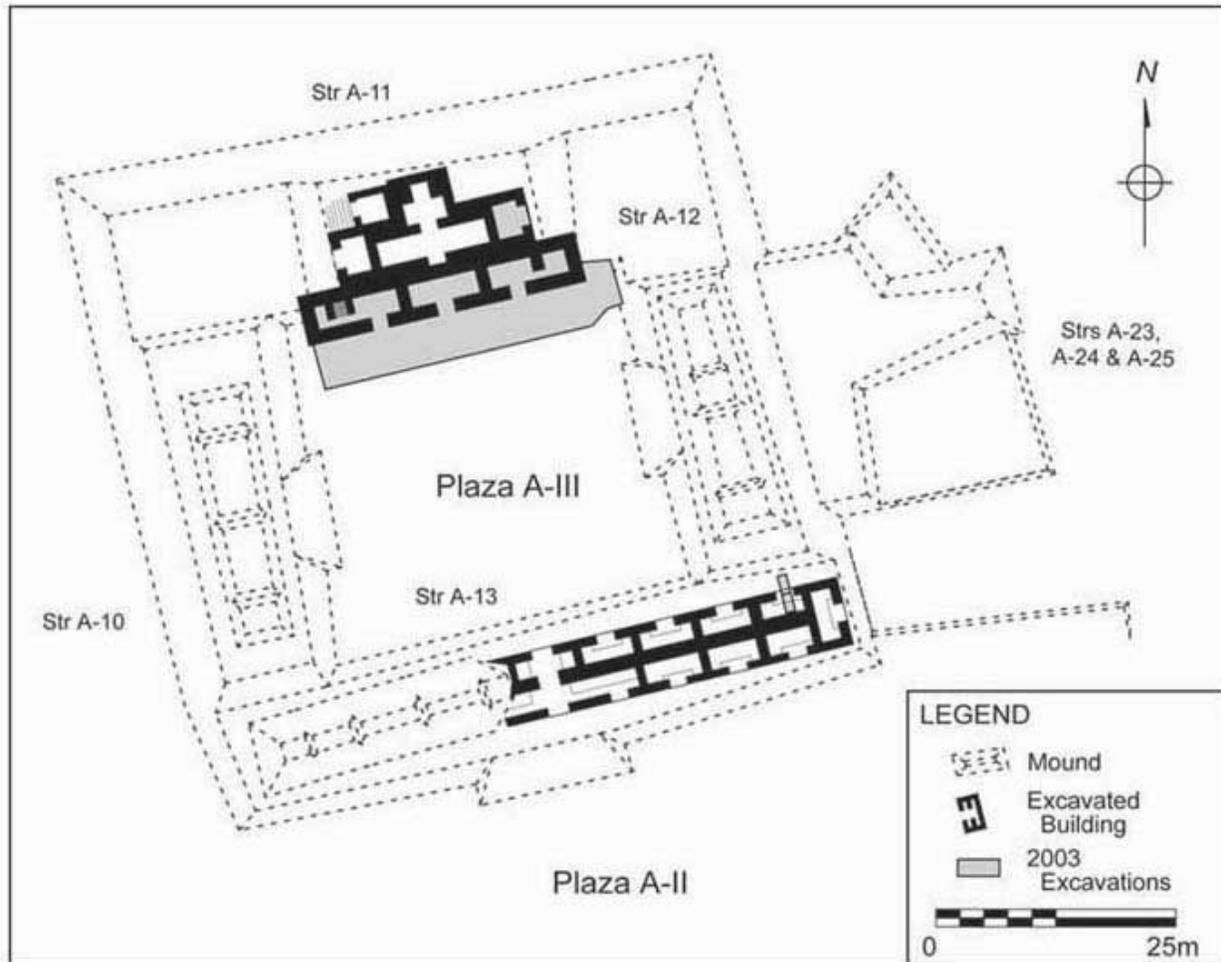


Figure 4. The Xunantunich palace compound.

### Objectives

In 2003, Yaeger proposed to return to the Xunantunich palace to complete the excavation of the lower building of Str. A-11 and to excavate a test trench in Str. A-13 (shown in grey on [Figure 4](#)). This research was a fundamentally collaborative enterprise with Belize's Tourism Development Project, one that integrated research questions with site conservation and tourism development. In the excavations in Str. A-11, we sought *in situ* artifacts and features that would allow us to better understand the activities that occurred in the lower rooms of the building. By clearing the lower building, we also expected to more precisely reconstruct the ways in which the palace's built environment channeled people's movements and shaped their interactions with the polity's ruler and other members of the ruling court. Finally, we hoped to add more detail to our knowledge of the structure's stratigraphic sequence and evaluate our initial interpretations of the nature and timing of the structure's abandonment and

dismantlement. We also proposed to clear Str. A-11's frontal terrace and the plaza floor in front of the structure and to excavate the only room of Str. A-11's upper building that MacKie left untouched, Room 4.

A secondary focus of our excavations in the palace was Str. A-13, a building that has a more complex construction history than the rest of the complex. Given that architectural modifications to other structures increasingly closed off visual and physical access to Plaza A-III and that Str. A-13 was the main point of communication between Plaza A-II and Plaza A-III, more detailed better knowledge of the changes in this building's morphology would allow us to reconstruct the decisions about how to structure interactions and access between the ruling court and its subjects. To this end, we excavated a 6 m x 1 m trench into the northern gallery of Str. A-13 in a room that had already been cleared to the floor of Str. A-13-1st.

### ***Methodology***

To accomplish our goal, we began by establishing a 4-m grid on Str. A-11, which served to demarcate our excavation sub-operations. A tunnel excavated by XAP in 1997 into the central room of the lower building had provided us with a solid understanding of the building's stratigraphy, making the 2003 excavations easier to plan. Our excavations respected the natural and cultural breaks in the stratigraphy, generally dividing thicker strata into multiple lots. When we approached architectural surfaces or found any primary deposits, we divided the sub-operation into smaller collection units that averaged 1 m on a side.

In five weeks of excavations, a crew that numbered seven supervisors and 31 laborers at its maximum accomplished the following tasks: (1) excavation of the entire lower building and frontal terrace of Str. A-11, as well as most of the adjacent plaza surface; (2) excavation of the easternmost room of Str. A-11's upper building; (3) excavation of a trench in Str. A-13; and (4) processing the resulting artifacts. The Government of Belize's Tourism Development Project subsequently consolidated Str. A-11, which is today exposed for the appreciation of visitors to the site.

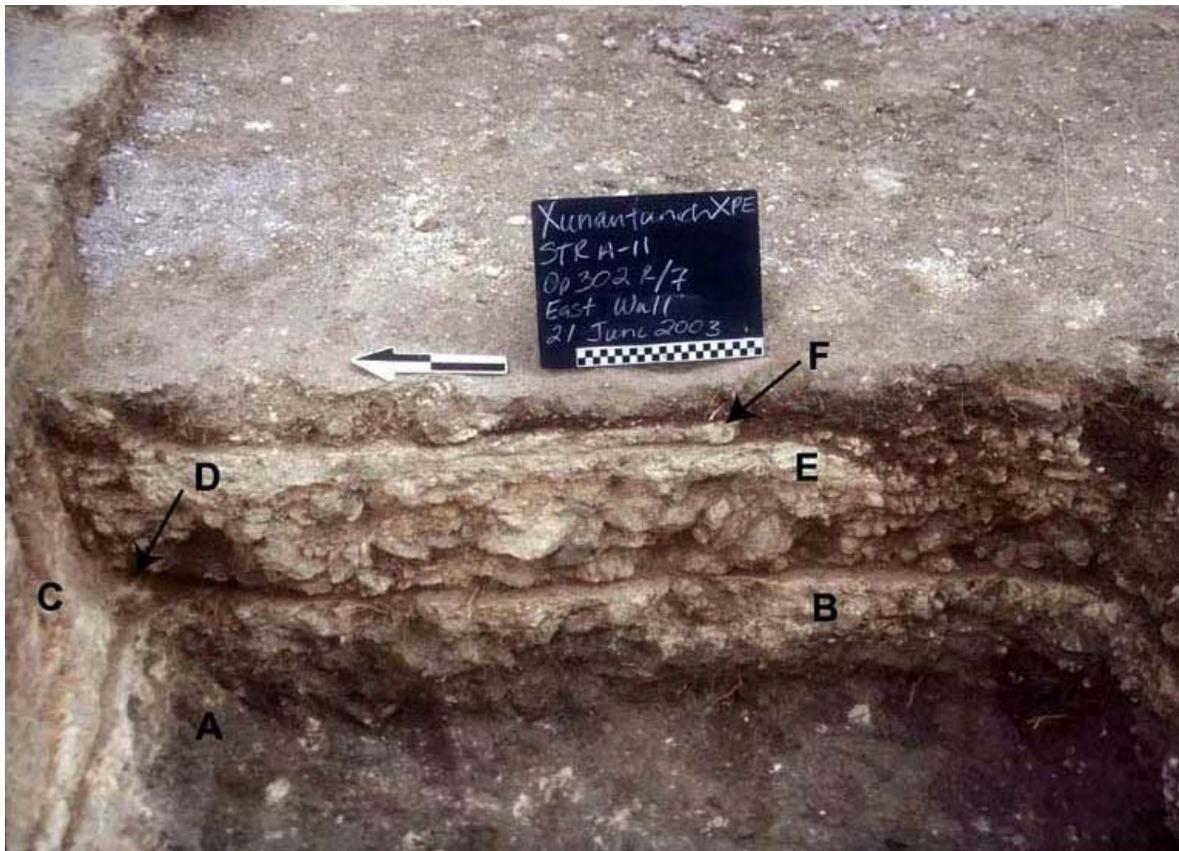
### **Findings**

The findings of the XPE are best presented as a chronological narrative of the construction, use, and abandonment of Str. A-11, from earliest to latest activities. Based on our 2003 excavations and previous work, we can identify five main phases of activity in Str. A-11, many of which we can confidently correlate with construction episodes and activities in other areas of the palace compound.

### ***I. Initial Construction of Plaza A-III and Associated Structures, including Str. A-11***

Sometime early in the Hats' Chaak phase, the Maya of Xunantunich began the construction of Plaza A-III, burying an older Middle Preclassic settlement (Yaeger 1997). This initial massive construction effort established a basic template for the palace's layout. Although subsequent modifications—sealing alleyways, extending terraces and sub-structure platforms, modifying superstructures—changed some of the buildings, generally blocking off view and access to Plaza A-III from other parts of the site, they did not change significantly the basic plan of the plaza.

The first step in the construction process was to level off the area under Plaza A-III by adding artificial fill consisting of marl and large pieces of limestone rubble. The result was a broad, raised surface upon which were raised early versions of Strs. A-10, A-11, A-12, A-13, the area between them being paved to form Plaza A-III. The Maya laid the most fill in the southwest corner of Plaza A-III, where bedrock was significantly lower than in other areas. In the northeast sector of Plaza A-III and under the adjacent Strs. A-11 and A-12, almost no fill was needed to level off the plaza surface. In this area of the compound, Late Classic building activity covered but did not apparently disturb a much older Middle Preclassic occupation, the remains of which were found well preserved under a dark matrix that is likely a buried A-Horizon that represents the ground surface at the time of the Late Classic construction (seen in [Figure 5](#), below).



**Figure 5. Op 302R: East profile of cut through plaza floor. A=Possible buried A-horizon; B=First floor of Plaza A-III; C=First frontal stairway of Str. A-11; D=Bead sealing join of frontal stairway and plaza surface; E=Second floor of Plaza A-III; F=Replastering of second floor of Plaza A-III.**

This first construction of Str. A-11 coincides with the initial plaster floor of Plaza A-III, and thus the massive fill event just described. MacKie (1985:44), Harrison (1996:78), van der Krift, and I (Yaeger 1997) all identified two major flooring episodes in Plaza A-III, separated by some 20 cm of fill ([Figure 5](#), above). The earlier floor surface runs under the basal course of substructure facing of Str. A-11, but a bead of plaster was worked into the junction. The lack of evidence for earlier substructures in 1997 probing excavations suggests that the plaster floor ended under the basal course. It seems likely that the earliest finished plaster surface extended just under the substructure facings, providing a hard, level surface for placing those cut stones. The early floor was later resurfaced, the new floor lipping up to both the substructure and the stairway.

The stratigraphic link indicating contemporaneity of the construction of Str. A-11 and the earliest plaza floor allows us to tie the initial building of Str. A-11 to the first versions of Strs. A-12 and A-10, which were also built in conjunction with the first plaza floor. Clearly the Plaza A-III compound was conceived of as a single unit and built with a plan that changed little in its overall form over time, and Str. A-11 delimited the northern edge of the new compound. From its inception, this structure was conceived of as a two-story building, but the two stories were organized very differently, as can be appreciated on [Figure 4](#) and [Figure 9](#). As MacKie's excavations demonstrated, the upper building had a T-shaped layout (MacKie 1985:figure 6). The heart of the upper building was Room 1, a large chamber measuring 11.6 × 2.6 m that faced south onto a broad frontal terrace. Low benches occupied both ends of the room, and an interior doorway led south into Room 2, a smaller room (4.3 × 2.3 m) with a raised floor surface. Yet another doorway pierced the northern wall of Room 2, leading either to another room or a recessed niche (Room 6), which had unfortunately largely fallen away down the north slope of the mound by the time of MacKie's excavations. Regardless of where it led, the Maya later blocked this passage with a masonry wall. MacKie recovered four vases and bowls and over a dozen water storage jars broken *in situ* on the floor in Rooms 1 and 2. This assemblage is clearly associated with the storage of liquids and the consumption of food and beverages. Three patolli boards were incised on the floors of those same rooms.

On either side of the central room lay two smaller flanking rooms, spanned with transverse vaults, each with a doorway that faced laterally. MacKie excavated the western room, Room 3, which measured 3.8 × 2.6 m. He found another pair of patolli boards on the floor of that room. We excavated the eastern room, Room 4, in 2003.

The overall layout of the upper building and the restricted functions of the pottery vessels found in Rooms 1 and 2 have led both MacKie (1985) and Yaeger (1997) to argue that the upper building was the private residence of the Xunantunich ruler.

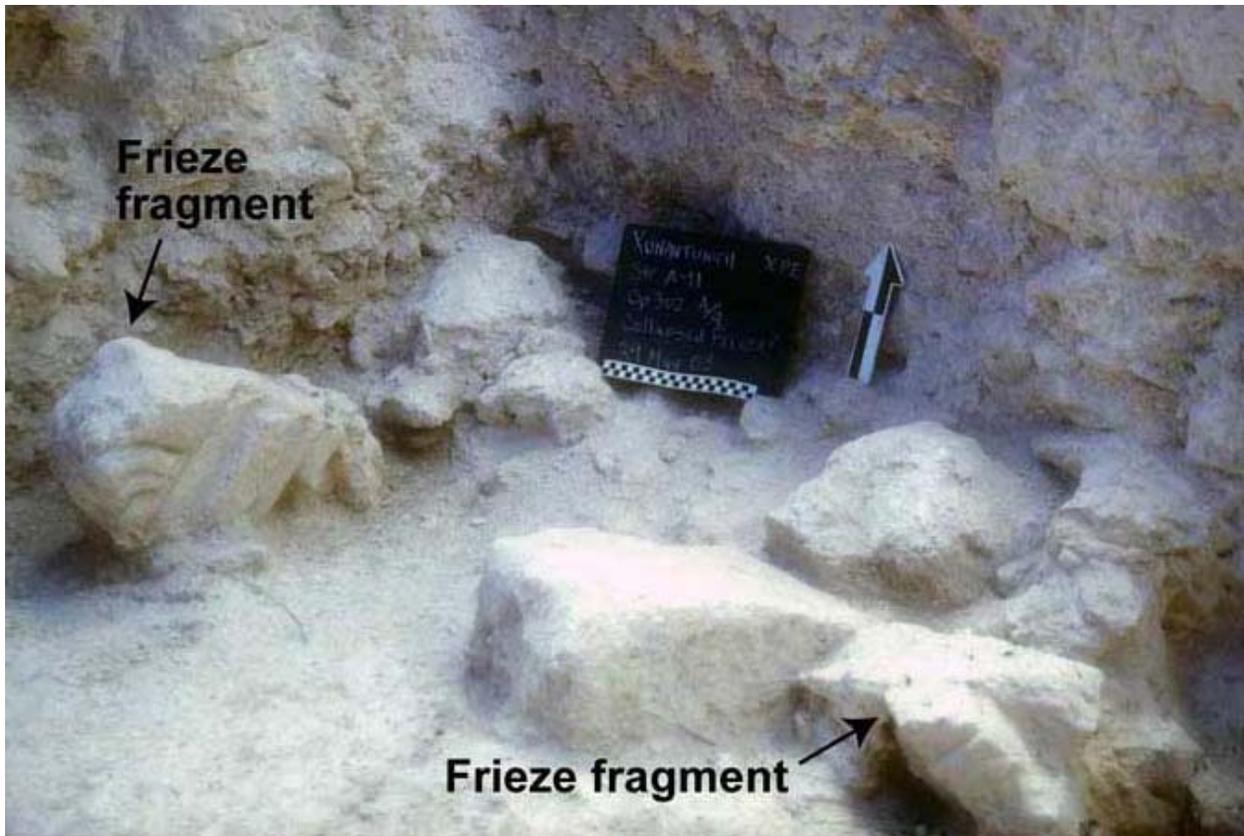


Figure 6. Op 302A/4: Architectural collapse, including two pieces of sculpted frieze, probably from the façade of the upper building of Str. A-11.

Mackie (1985:33, Plate 36) recovered fragments of carved and plastered limestone blocks in architectural collapse from the north side of the upper building, near Room 3. We found several sculpted fragments in the upper levels of architectural collapse in the rooms of the lower building (Figure 6, shown above, and Figure 7 and Figure 8, shown below). These levels include blocks and other architectural material that derived from the collapse of the south face of the upper building. Together, these findings indicate that a decorative frieze decorated at least the north and south sides of the upper building, likely running around the entire structure framed by the building's medial and superior moldings. With its two-story façade and decorative frieze, Str. A-11 would have presented clear architectural parallels to Str. A-6-1st on the summit of the Castillo, a fact also noted by Mackie (1985:44). The lack of frieze fragments in collapse on the frontal terrace of the lower building suggests that it was not decorated in a similar manner.



Figure 7. Fragment of architectural frieze found in collapse of Str. A-11.



Figure 8. Fragment of architectural frieze found in collapse of Str. A-11.

The lower building consisted of a gallery of five rooms accessed by three doorways that opened onto a broad frontal terrace (Figure 9, Figure 10 and Figure 11, shown below). The central doorway led to the large central room, Room 9, the floor of which was raised above the surface of the frontal terrace. Flanking doorways to the east and west of the central doorway provided access to smaller rooms on either side of the central room, which were also characterized by raised interior floor surfaces. Within these flanking rooms, interior doorways led to even smaller rooms located at the building's lateral extremes. In the western room, a very steep interior stairway with a corbel vaulted ceiling led up from the interior passageway to emerge in front of the doorway of Room 3 of the upper building (Figure 12, below). This narrow passage provided the only access to the upper building and the ruler's residence at this time. All of the doorways of the lower building had holes with rods for tying curtains to limit visual and physical access into the rooms.

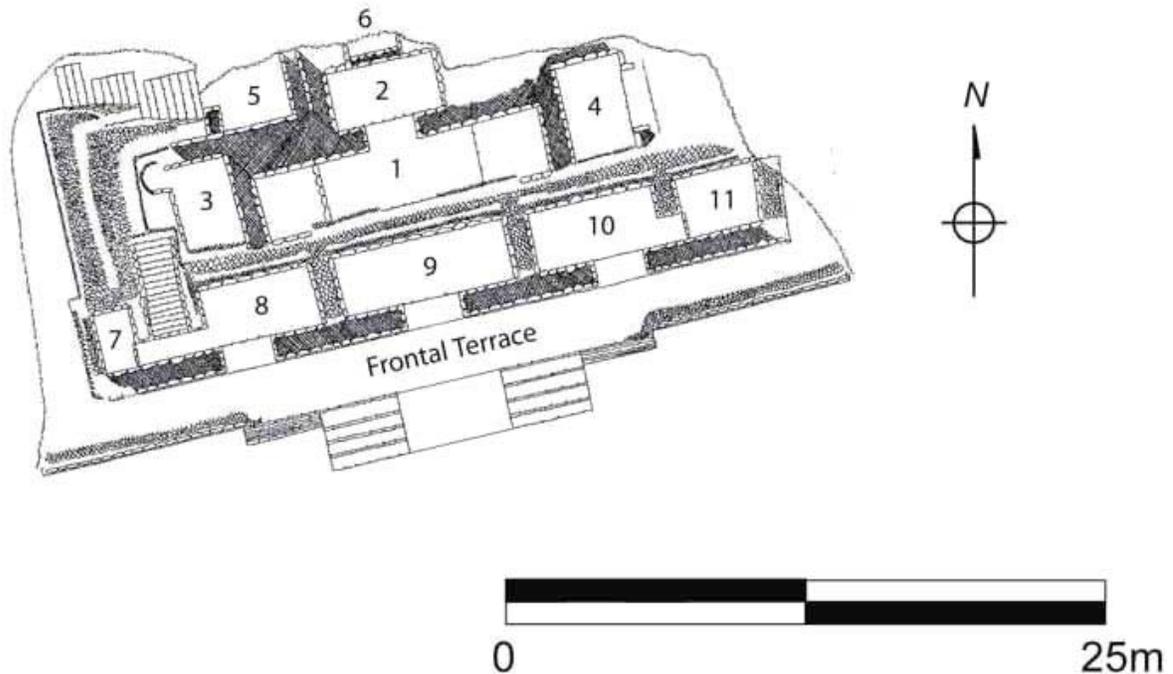


Figure 9. Plan of Str. A-11 following excavation. Drawing by Bernabé Camal, Jr., and Jorge Can, courtesy of Dr. Jaime Awe and the Government of Belize Tourism Development Project.



**Figure 10. Str. A-11 from the south, near the end of 2003 excavations.**



**Figure 11. Str. A-11 from the west, near the end of the 2003 excavations.**



**Figure 12. Stairway leading to upper building.**

The contents of the rooms of the lower building suggest that a very different set of activities occurred there, in contrast to the upper building. In Room 9, we found two incised patolli boards ([Figure 13](#), below), fragments of a broken drum, and registers of incised "graffiti" decorations ([Figure 14](#), below) that probably represent visions achieved during ritual trances (Haviland and Haviland 1995). In Rooms 7 and 8, to the west, one arm of a patolli board was carved on the floor of one room, while graffiti was incised on the walls of the room and on the walls defining the stairway that lead to the upper building. In Rooms 10 and 11 to the east, another patolli board was encountered on the floor. These walls might have borne graffiti like those found in rooms to the west, but, because the Maya dismantled this room, it is impossible to confirm this pattern.

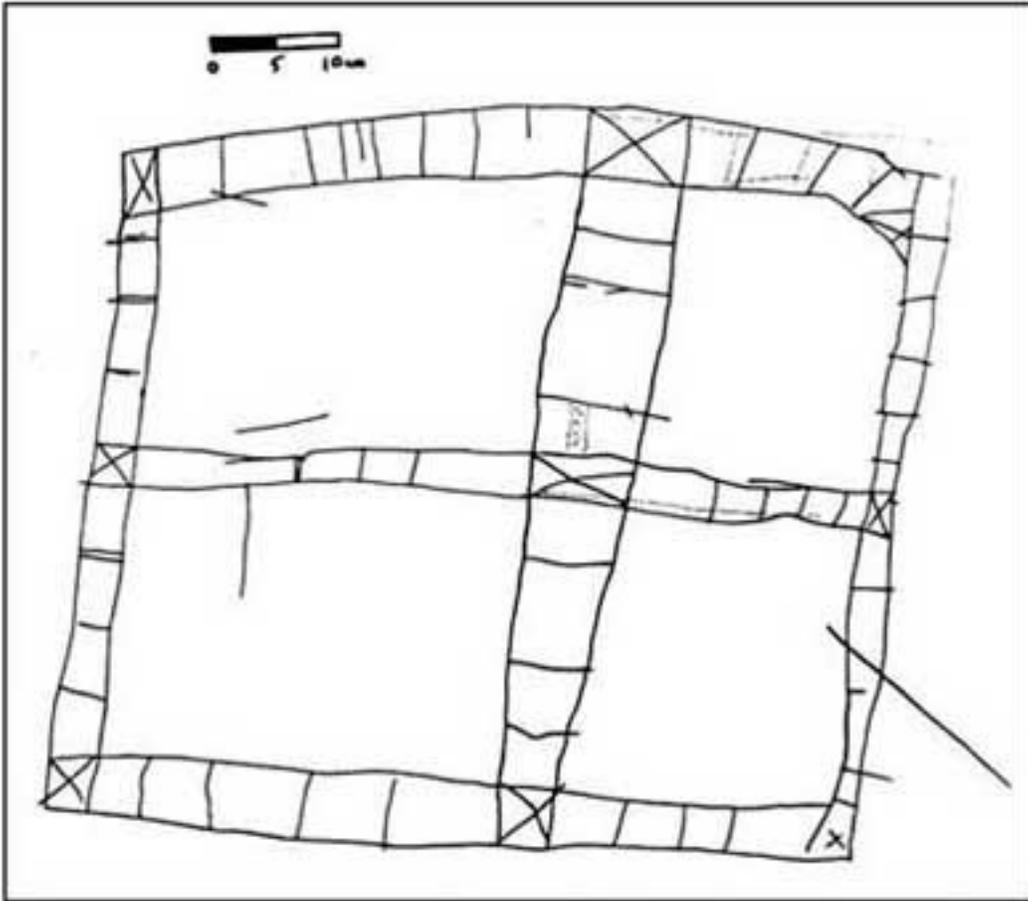


Figure 13. Incised patolli board on floor of Room 9. Drawing by Jason Yaeger.

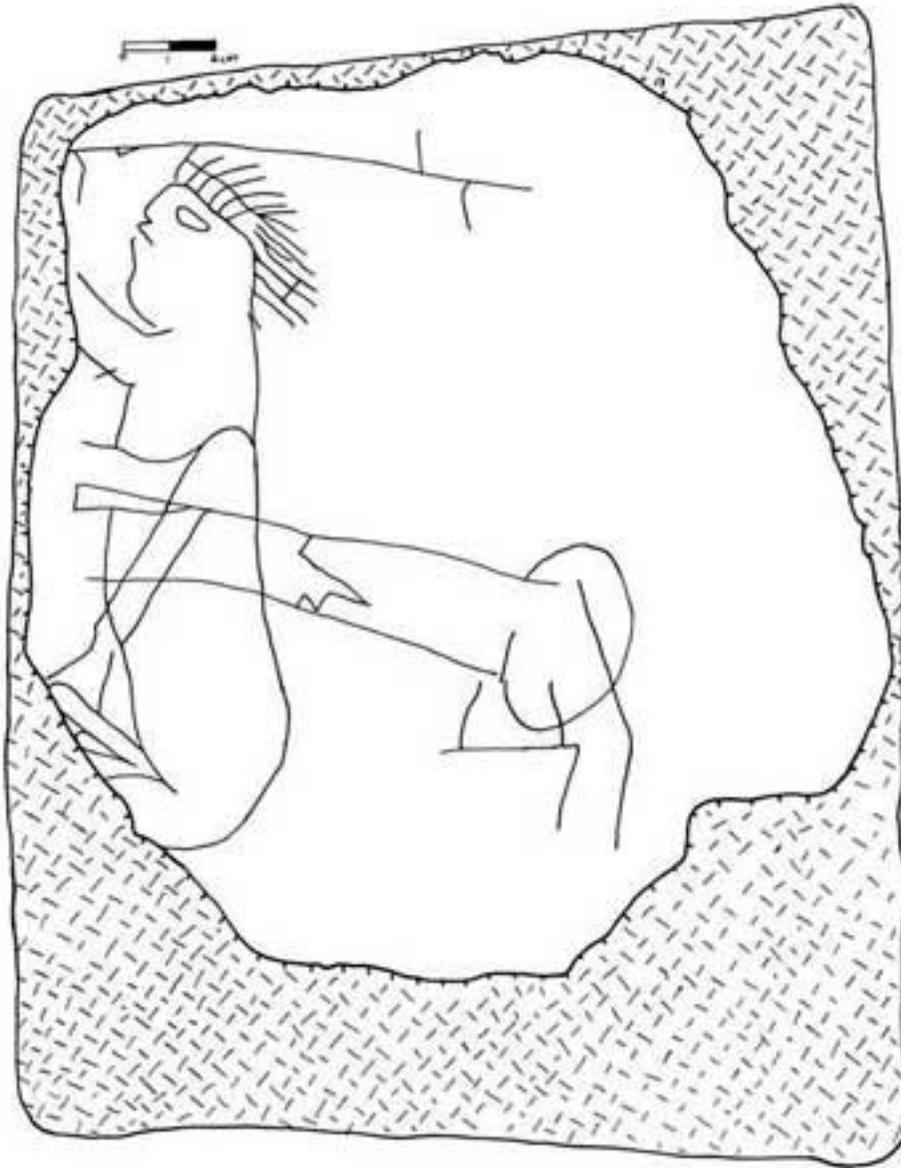


Figure 14. Op 272A/1-P2: Incised "graffito" on plastered block recovered in Room 9. Drawing by Leonel Panti.

In addition to these ritually charged images and artifacts, large pottery fragments representing a few whole vessels carpeted the floor of the central and eastern rooms ([Figure 15](#), shown below), much in the same manner as the *in situ* vessels Mackie found in the upper building. Unlike the serving vessels found in the ruler's residence in the upper building, as discussed above, the vessels in the lower building were large jars and neckless ollas, which LeCount (1996) suggests would have been used for long-term storage of either liquids or dry goods, possibly food or drink to be consumed. Their large size suggests that the vessels were stationary features in these rooms.



Figure 15. Sherd scatter on floor of Room 10.

All these findings point to the use of at least the central room as a place for private or semi-private religious experiences by the ruler and/or his close associates. Interestingly, except for one asterisk-like incision on a bench in Room 2, MacKie found no incised graffiti on the walls of the upper building, despite good plaster preservation, demonstrating that the ruler and ruling family did not record trance images in their living quarters.

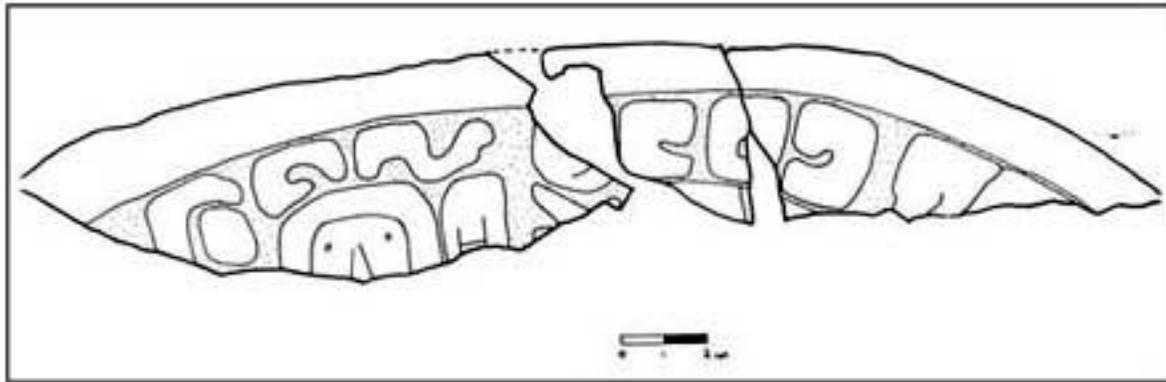
The lower building's frontal terrace was elevated 1.85 m above the paved surface of Plaza A-III, and a broad central stairway made with large cut-stone blocks that had slightly battered risers provided access from the plaza. In its original form as seen on [Figure 9](#), a wide masonry stair block in the middle of the stairway effectively extended the surface of the frontal terrace out over the stairway and brought it closer to the plaza. This block was later removed and replaced with stairs.

The data collected by the Xunantunich Palace Excavations and previous research indicate that Plaza A-III complex was the residence and court of the Xunantunich rulers during the Hats' Chaak phase. Its location and internal spatial divisions suggest it was an important venue for the ruling family and its representatives to interact with their subjects. Furthermore, the built environment divides this space into five distinct levels of increasingly restricted space.

The entrance to Xunantunich from the Mopan valley was via the Northeast Complex ([Figure 3](#)), a paved causeway that led to Plaza A-II (Keller 1995). The entire northern side of Plaza A-II was dominated by the elevated platform of Str. A-13, which would have been visually prominent to arriving visitors. Furthermore, the stairway leading up to Str. A-13 would have been easily accessible, suggesting that at least some of the activities in Str. A-13 and the architectural spaces reached through Str. A-13 were meant for a relatively large segment of the visiting public.

Excavations by Belize Department of Archaeology personnel in the 1980s revealed that the rooms along Str. A-13's south side all contain benches that faced outward. The lack of reported *in situ* assemblages in these rooms makes their identification difficult, but their high benches, proximity to the city's main entrance, and lack of privacy suggest a more public, administrative function. It is plausible that hinterland residents would have consulted with the representatives of the polity's rulers here about matters like tribute payments, village disputes, and ritual concerns. It formed the first level of access to the court, the least restricted in terms of both physical and visual accessibility.

The principal entrance to Plaza A-III, the heart of the palace complex, is a single large doorway located at the mid-point of Str. A-13 and flanked by small rooms ([Figure 4](#)). This entryway created a second level of access to the court, as the doorway led to Plaza A-III and the adjacent northern gallery of Str. A-13. These rooms, facing Plaza A-III, are identical in architectural form and internal features to those on the south side, suggesting that they were used for broadly similar activities, but only by those people permitted to enter Plaza A-III.



**Figure 16. Op 257N/3-P1: Fragments of a carved panel found on the frontal terrace of Str. A-11. Drawing by Jennifer Scarborough.**

A third level of restricted access to the ruler's court was created architecturally by the stairways leading up to the broad, raised frontal terraces of the substructure platforms of the other three structures flanking Plaza A-III, Strs. A-10, A-11, and A-12. Especially interesting is Str. A-11: the stairway up to the frontal terrace of Str. A-11 had a large stair block that created a stage-like extension of the frontal terrace out toward the plaza. This feature suggests that some of the activities on the frontal terrace interaction were for public consumption. Associated with the frontal terrace, we also found fragments of a carved wall panel with an inscription that bears the child-of-father glyph but is otherwise incomplete ([Figure 16](#), above).

The rooms of the superstructures of Strs. A-10, A-12, and Str. A-11's lower building constitute yet a fourth level of access. Directly under the ruler's residential suite and connected to it, the five rooms of the lower building of Str. A-11 provided spaces for more restricted, private interaction and consultation with members of the court, including perhaps the ruler. These practices may have included consultation of the spiritual realm by the ruler or other members of the royal court, given the presence of incised patolli boards, a broken drum in the central room, and registers of graffiti that probably represent visions achieved during ritual trances ([Figure 13](#) and [Figure 14](#); Haviland and Haviland 1995). Curtain holders on the three external doorways of the lower building made it possible to hide the interactions and other activities in those rooms from any people on the frontal terrace or in Plaza A-III.

The final and most restricted zone consisted of the ruler's residential compound itself, the upper building of Str. A-11. As noted above, the only access to this area was by an interior stairway hidden within the lower building.

## **II. Changing Access to the Upper Building**

The first modification we can document in Str. A-11 represents a substantial change in the building's layout. The Maya closed off the interior stairway that provided access to the upper building, blocking the stairway's lower entrance with large cut stone blocks and filling the entire stairway with a solid, dense mass of well-laid limestone rubble, cobbles, and plaster, some of which can still be seen *in situ* in [Figure 12](#).

Similarities in masonry style suggest that this modification coincided with the construction of the upper building's Room 5, which necessitated an extension of the northwest sector of the platform ([Figure 9](#)). A steep stairway, shown on [Figure 17](#), below, was laid against the north face of Str. A-11's substructure platform, and it provided access up to Room 5 and the rest of the upper building from the alley that extended off the northwest corner of Plaza A-III between Strs. A-10 and A-12. This change to Str. A-11's layout altered the ways in which the ruler could interact with his/her subjects, eliminating direct access to the ruler's living quarters from the lower building and shunting that access to an alley off the structure's northwest corner, where it was hidden from the view of people in Plaza A-III.



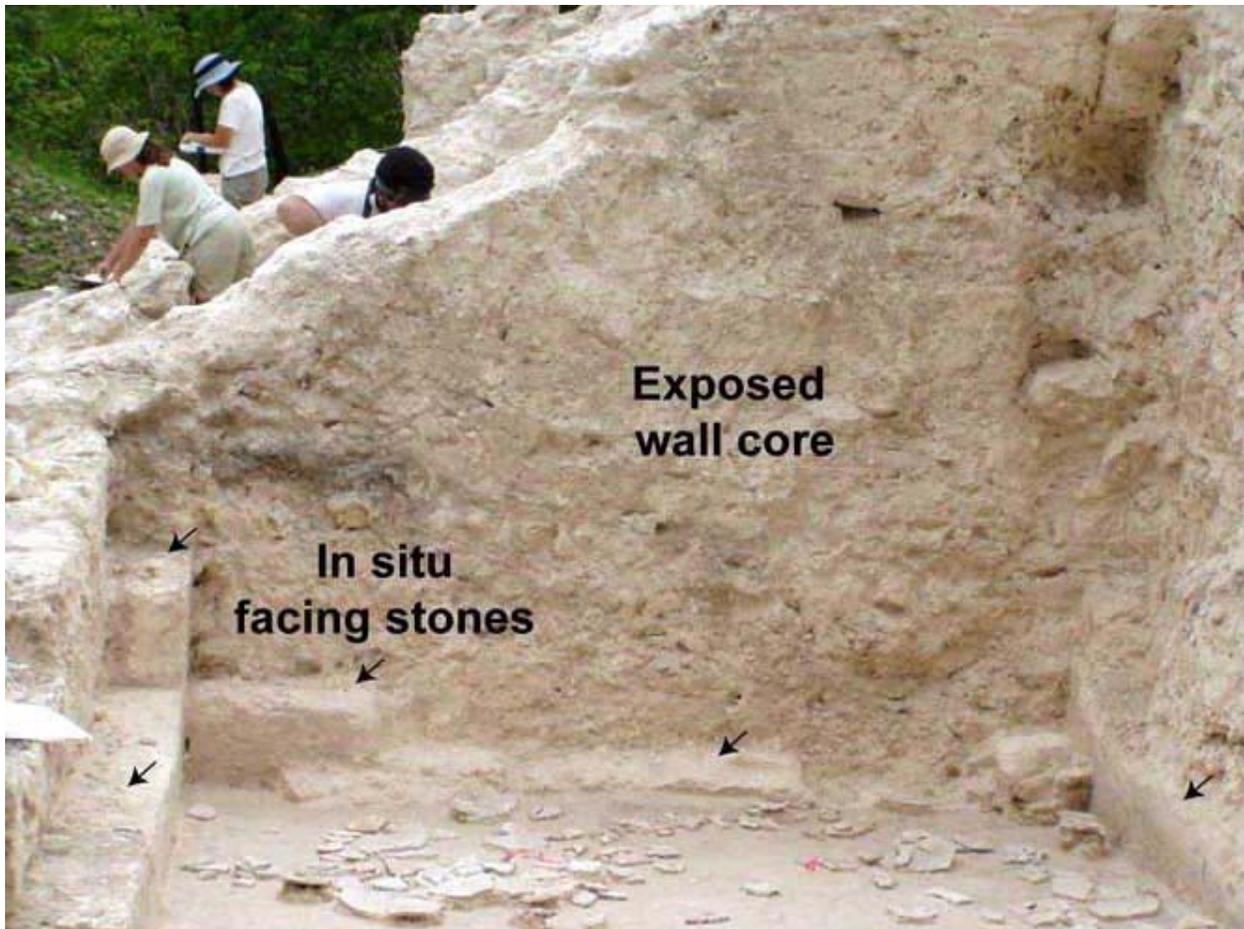
**Figure 17. Stairway leading up to Room 5.**

### ***III. Dismantling and Filling the Flanking Rooms of the Lower Building***

The next modification to Str. A-11 involved the dismantling and filling of the four rooms that flanked the central room (Rooms 7, 8, 10, and 11). First, the blocks of the walls and corbel vault were pulled down by picking through their plastered surfaces along the joins between blocks and then removing the blocks ([Figure 18](#), below, shows similar marks on the west wall of Room 4, in the upper building). In some walls, the facing stones were removed down to the level of the floor ([Figure 19](#), below); in others, they were left to a height nearing the vault spring. Most of the blocks were apparently removed for use elsewhere, as we found few blocks in the fill of the rooms.



**Figure 18. West wall of Room 4 after excavation. Note channels picked through plaster to expose joins in the limestone block masonry.**



**Figure 19. Sherd scatter on floor of Room 10. Note the exposed wall core and few remaining facing stones of the walls.**

During this dismantling process, large utilitarian vessels were broken in the central and eastern rooms, and their remains scattered across the floors of the rooms. In the far eastern room, the skeleton of a young adult (early 20s, Sherry Gibbs, personal communication, 2004) was resting on its side in a flexed position, head to the north. No grave goods accompanied the body, which sat on a bit of marl just above the floor of the room. Although a few large rocks lay above the skeleton, there was no evidence of a crypt or other burial architecture. It is plausible to interpret this individual as a sacrifice, but it is important to note that there is no direct evidence to support that interpretation.

The doorways leading to these rooms were sealed with large limestone blocks (note blocked doorways in [Figure 10](#) and [Figure 11](#)). Then the rooms were filled up with marl and some limestone rocks. At the top of this marl fill in Room 10, the Maya placed an offering of several red-slipped bowls. These vessels are unusual, in that most offerings at Xunantunich that use bowls incorporate Mount Maloney Black vessels. Red slipped vessels of Pine Ridge carbonate ware, like those in this deposit, are quite rare in Xunantunich and its hinterland. Sealing these two lateral rooms, the Maya eliminated

architectural spaces associated with relatively private interactions between the ruler, members of the court, and some subjects.

#### ***IV. Remodeling the Frontal Terrace and Stairway***

Sometime following the second major plaza surfacing and construction of the final superstructures of Strs. A-10, A-12 and A-13, the Maya modified the frontal terrace in front of the lower building. This modification involved two changes. First, they raised the surface of the terrace some 30 cm. This modification did not impact the entire frontal terrace, but rather extended from the doorway to Room 8 to the doorway into Room 10, forming a small step up from the level of the original frontal terrace. The fact that this step does not occur in line with the jambs of the doorways, but rather in the very middle of the doorway, supports the inference that the doorways were blocked by this time.

Second, they removed the stair block in front of Str. A-11 and laid down a heavily plastered stairway directly over the old stairway and resurfaced the frontal terrace. Both of these architectural additions used small limestone blocks, contrasting with the earlier modifications that all used much larger limestone blocks. MacKie (1985) first distinguished these two masonry types, and he suggested that they were temporally diagnostic. Although small block masonry stratigraphically postdates large-block masonry in many structures at Xunantunich, other factors impact masonry choices and masonry style is therefore not a reliable temporal indicator (LeCount *et al.* 2002:55-56). The new stairway was wider than the earlier stairway, extending out to the middle of the doorways of Rooms 8 and 10 and corresponding with the addition to the frontal terrace just mentioned.

#### ***V. Dismantling and Filling the Central Room of the Lower Building***

The final modification to Str. A-11, marking its transition from the ruler's residence to unused space entailed dismantling and filling in the central room of Str. A-11. As with the flanking rooms, the walls and vault of the central room were pulled down, large storage vessels were broken in the eastern part of the room, and the room was filled in. Two differences set the dismantling of the central room apart, however: the fill included a notable number of plastered cut-stone blocks, some bearing incised graffiti designs ([Figure 14](#)), and the doorway leading into the room from the frontal terrace was never blocked with a masonry wall. Although the filling in of this room marked the end of Str. A-11's use, it is important to note that this did not represent a radical departure from previous use of the complex, but followed the systematic dismantling and in-filling of the lower building's four flanking rooms that occurred in at least three stages.

At some point during the history of Str. A-11, the upper building collapsed as well. MacKie (1961, 1985) argued that this collapse was a sudden event that occurred during the use of the structure, perhaps as a result of an earthquake. He supports this argument by observing that fallen vault stones—in at least one case, a group of vault

stones that obviously fell as a body—sat directly on the plastered floor surfaces, with no intervening soil or sediment, and that this architectural collapse crushed a number of ceramic vessels that apparently sat on the floor of the room. Clearly, the presence of *in situ* vault collapse in Rooms 1 and 2 is very distinct from the situation in any of the rooms of the lower building.

Mackie suggested that the entire upper building collapsed at once, but our excavations of Room 4 indicate a more complex scenario. The collapse within Room 4 did contain the density of vault stones that Mackie found in Rooms 1 and 2. Furthermore, the surface of Room 4's west wall bore clear evidence of picking through the plaster to expose the joins of the underlying blocks, identical to the evidence for intentionally dismantling the rooms of the lower building. This raises three possibilities: (1) all of the rooms of the upper building were dismantled at once, but using different techniques; (2) the central rooms of the upper building collapsed first, destabilizing the entire building and stimulating the intentional dismantling of the adjacent rooms; or (3) the flanking rooms of the upper building were dismantled first, destabilizing the entire building and leading to the collapse of the central rooms. The second scenario seems most likely, but it is unfortunately impossible to directly sequence the collapse of the central rooms and the dismantling of Room 4, nor correlate those events with the dismantling of the rooms of the lower building.

## **VI. Abandonment**

By the end of the Hats' Chaak phase, most buildings of the palace were abandoned, including Str. A-11. The ceramic material found in Strs. A-11 and A-12 and associated trash on the patio point to a relatively early date for this abandonment, sometime late in the Hats' Chaak phase, perhaps around AD 750 or 775. This is less than a century after the palace's original construction.

The abandonment of Plaza A-III is part of the larger process of site contraction at the end of the Hats' Chaak phase (LeCount *et al.* 2002), which in turn is part of the polity's decline into the Terminal Classic Tsak' phase (Ashmore *et al.* 2004). It is noteworthy that the palace was abandoned early in this process. Although many of the buildings at the site that were abandoned in the Hats' Chaak phase, including the collapsed Str. A-12, were scavenged for stone, the Maya never disturbed the collapsed architecture of Str. A-11, suggesting that it was still recognized as a powerful place.

## **Conclusions**

By way of conclusion, I would like to offer some broader inferences that can be made from the data collected by XPE. First, all available evidence supports the hypothesis—first forwarded by Mackie—that Plaza A-III was where members of the ruling family lived and where they interacted with their subjects. This inference is supported by the layout of the complex and its individual buildings, and by the artifacts and features found

therein. That said, the data suggest that Plaza A-III was not the venue for all of the types of activities that Simon Martin (2001) has argued characterized the royal court of a *k'uhul ahaw*. There is no evidence, for example, of attached craft specialists. Even more conspicuous is the almost total absence of accretionary growth in the residential structures associated with the court, a pattern very distinct from what we would expect from a palace occupied for several generations. Finally, the palace compound contains no bench with "arm rests" that are understood to be thrones in the central Maya lowlands (Harrison 2001; Noble 1999). I have argued elsewhere that these observations strongly suggest that Plaza A-III housed a more limited ruling court that conforms with what might be expected of a ruling family with close and subordinate ties to a larger and more powerful kingdom (Yaeger 2003; C.f. Taschek and Ball 2004 for different interpretations of some of the same lines of evidence).

Whatever the status of its inhabitants vis-à-vis neighboring kingdoms, the palace compound was a powerful place where the new rulers of Xunantunich sought to impress their subjects and consolidate their power. The buildings were large and awe-inspiring, but perhaps as importantly, they were adorned with powerful symbols that reflect the ways in which the rulers of Xunantunich sought to legitimize their position. The fragments of the carved wall panel found in 1997 demonstrate that they deployed concepts of noble descent in establishing their authority. The palace's location at the cosmologically powerful northern edge of the site associated its residents with revered ancestors and the celestial realm (Ashmore 1991). Furthermore, stucco frieze fragments recovered by MacKie and by XPE on Str. A-11 reference powerful concepts like the witz sacred mountain.

We found ample evidence to confirm that at least some of the activities in the lower building related to the ruler's role as intermediary between the divine realm and his subjects. We recorded several more incised graffiti designs on the walls and two additional patolli boards carved into the building's floor. Curtain tie holders allowed for the sealing of visual and physical access into these rooms. Planned iconographic analysis of sculpted stucco fragments from Str. A-11's façade—many of which have recognizable motifs—might clarify further the cosmological claims made by the site's rulers. Unfortunately, we found no additional fragments of hieroglyph-bearing monuments.

The built environment of the palace compound created spaces for five levels of access to the court of the ruler of Xunantunich. Movement from one space to the next was highly visible, as it required ascending broad stairways in plain sight of larger open spaces, and then disappearing from view upon passing through narrow doorways. This built environment created the potential for these kinds of movements to reflect one's degree of privileged access to the court and the ruler in a given contextual situation. Clearly, the architects designed the palace in part to reinforce the hierarchical differences that were a key part of the city-state's new social order.

Over time, this built environment shows a progressive restriction of access to the ruler and of spaces for interaction between the ruler and his/her subjects. The Maya blocked and filled the interior stairway to Str. A-11's upper building, the ruler's private residence,

shifting access to the rear of the structure. Subsequently, they blocked the doorways of the flanking rooms and filled them, sealing these spaces for private interactions with the ruler. The Maya later removed the stair block in front of Str. A-11, a feature that had permitted the extension of activities on the frontal terrace into closer proximity to the people in the plaza. Use of the central room continued, but it was also later dismantled stone-by-stone and then filled, marking the end of Str. A-11's use-life.

Clearly, the abandonment of the palace bespeaks political transformations at the end of the Late Classic. The continuity of ritual practice on Strs. A-1 and A-6 during the Terminal Classic Tsak' phase (A.D. 780-890), the carving of three stelae and an altar in the Tsak' phase, and the presence of Tsak'-phase occupation in Str. A-15, the acropolis of El Castillo, and Group B all indicate that the site remained an important political center for several generations after the abandonment of most of the structures surrounding Plaza A-III. Instead of signaling the abandonment of Xunantunich as MacKie (1961) argued, the intentional dismantling of the palace—an event charged with symbolic and political significance—is better understood as a sign of intense political change at Xunantunich at the end of the Late Classic period. Although it is possible that the ruling family simply moved to another residential location within the site, given the magnitude of the changes, it seems more likely that the final dismantling of the palace reflects a replacement of the ruling family. The palace had served for generations as the residence for the polity's rulers and an integral component of their efforts to establish their legitimacy and recraft the region's social order had no place in the new Terminal Classic political order, and it was abandoned, rather than remodeled and rehabilitated.

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