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## 19 *IN THE LAND OF THE AVOCADO: RECENT ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS AT PUSILHA, TOLEDO DISTRICT, BELIZE*

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*The Late Classic period saw the proliferation of secondary states throughout the Maya lowlands. Since 2001, the Pusilha Archaeological Project (PUSAP) has studied the growth of one such site in the south-eastern periphery of the Maya world. In this chapter, we examine recent research at Pusilha, Toledo District, Belize, with a special focus on external economic relations. These relations suggest to us that the inhabitants of the site may have come from the southern Peten at or shortly before the beginning of the Late Classic period. Our data are drawn especially from excavations conducted during the 2004 and 2005 field seasons. Several burials, including a royal tomb, were discovered during these excavations.*

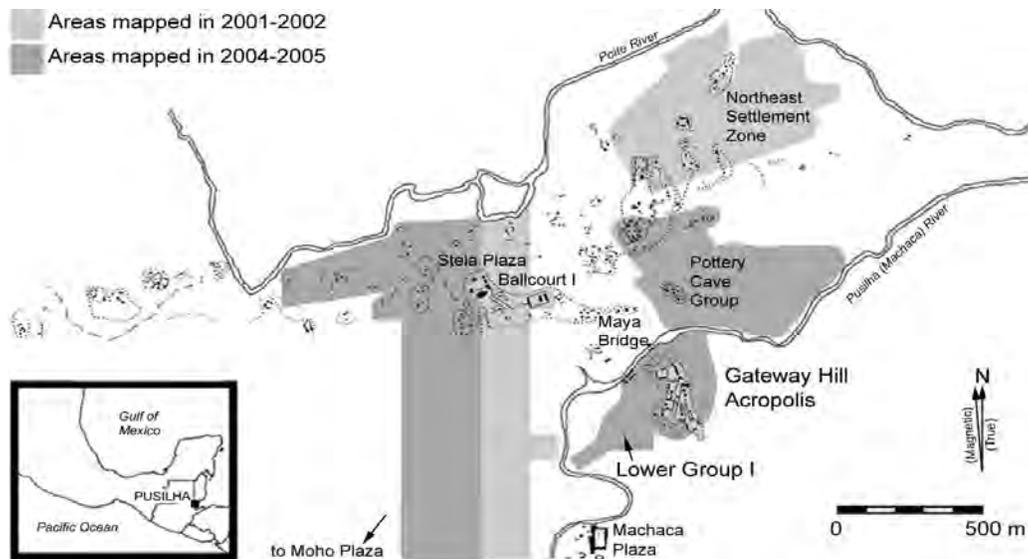
### **Introduction**

Since 2001, the Pusilha Archaeological Project (PUSAP) has conducted archaeological investigations at Pusilha, Toledo District, Belize. Preliminary results of the first three of our four field seasons were presented at the First and Second Belize Symposia. In publications resulting from those conferences (Bill and Braswell 2005; Braswell et al. 2004a), we describe our research questions, delineate the dynastic history of the city as revealed by Project Co-Director Christian Prager's epigraphic study of the then-known 22 carved stelae and hieroglyphic stair, and outline a preliminary ceramic sequence of the site. In this paper, we will review, expand, and refine upon our initial conclusions, and also discuss the investigation of seven structures excavated during the 2004 and 2005 field seasons. Excavations in one of these structures revealed an important tomb belonging to a ruler of the site.

The Maya city of Pusilha, whose ancient name was **Un** or avocado, is located in the village of San Benito Poité, Toledo District, less than 2-km east of the border with Guatemala (Figure 1). Rediscovered and explored by archaeologists from the

British Museum Expedition to British Honduras in 1927, it was one of the first sites in Belize to be systematically investigated. At that time, the best-preserved stelae from the site were cut up and transported to London. Sylvanus Morley included a lengthy discussion of their calendrical glyphs in *The Inscriptions of Peten* (1938), but despite their early fame, the Pusilha stelae have all been in storage at the British Museum for decades. In addition to the monuments, the pottery of Pusilha was viewed by early investigators as extraordinary. Thomas Joyce's (1929) description of ceramics excavated from Pottery Cave, a large natural chultun at the base of an important residential group at Pusilha, was one of the very first ceramic analyses published for the Maya Lowlands and provided important comparative data for research conducted at Holmul and, later, Uaxactun. Finally, the ancient Maya bridge spanning the Machaca River also drew the attention of archaeologists to Pusilha.

Despite its large size, a number of carved monuments, a unique work of engineering, and importance to ceramicists working in the early 20th century, very little systematic research has been conducted at Pusilha during the past 70 years. As part of



**Figure 1.** The Maya site of Pusilha, Belize (based on Leventhal 1990: Figure 8.1). Gray areas were mapped in 2001-2002 and 2004-2005; newly discovered structures in these regions are not included in the map.

his regional study focusing on Lubaantun, Norman Hammond (1975) visited Pusilha and conducted additional explorations of Pottery Cave. In 1979 and 1980, Richard Leventhal (1990, 1992) produced a pace-and-compass map of portions of the site and conducted test-pitting excavations in several groups. More recently, a team led by Gary Rex Walters investigated caves and conducted general reconnaissance.

Our interest in Pusilha grew out of research Cassandra Bill and Geoffrey Braswell conducted at Copan. Since its rediscovery, several investigators have posited a connection of some sort between Pusilha and the Copan and Quiriguá regions. Evidence for this connection consists of a shared tradition of carved-in-the-round zoomorphic altars, close similarities between the Pusilha and Quiriguá emblem glyphs (the main sign of the latter differs principally in its horizontal orientation), and apparent references at Pusilha to Ruler 11 of Copan and an enigmatic figure nicknamed Foliated (or Leaf or Decorated) **Ajaw**, once thought to have been a pre-dynastic ruler of the Honduran city. Joyce Marcus (2003:95) suggested that, like Quiriguá, Pusilha may

have begun its political history as a small regional province, later annexed by the expanding Copan state, and finally, may have reasserted its independence during the period of Copan's fragmentation. Alternatively, following Martin and Grube (2000), we also considered the possibility that Pusilha and Copan were linked not only with each other, but also allied to Tikal. We hoped to evaluate both of these hypotheses from an economic perspective, as well as through a careful analysis of the large hieroglyphic corpus of Pusilha. As often is the case in archaeological research, we have now largely abandoned both our preconceptions. Instead, we argue that Pusilha was not closely allied in a political or economic sense with Copan or Tikal.

### Ceramic Analysis

One of the principal lines of argument against close economic ties between Pusilha and Copan is drawn from the analysis of ceramics excavated during the past three field seasons. Cassandra Bill, Co-Director of PUSAP, has studied these materials and has tentatively defined a four-phase sequence of occupation dating to the beginning of the Late Classic, the later Late

Classic, the Terminal Classic, and the Postclassic periods. Although materials collected by Walters from caves in the area of Pusilha demonstrate that the region was visited during the Early Classic period, Cassandra Bill has identified only two possible Early Classic sherds in our excavated collections, both recovered from the same mixed fill context. Nevertheless, Stela P begins with the initial series date of **9.7.0.0.0** and contains a historical retrospective date of **9.6.17.8.18** (A.D. 570), implying that the kingdom was founded shortly before the beginning of the Late Classic period.

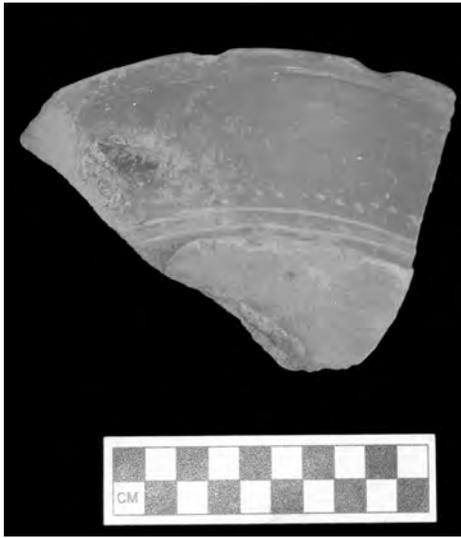
The Late Classic assemblage of Pusilha reveals close ceramic ties with the Peten, particularly the southern and southwestern lowlands, but only slight evidence of interaction with western Honduras (Bill and Braswell 2005; Braswell et al. 2004b). These evanescent ties are manifested principally in polychrome pottery that shares a few motifs with contemporary painted ceramics from Copan, and strangely, from eastern El Salvador. Although the data are not robust, our excavations in and around Pottery Cave suggest that these weak ties with the southeastern periphery were most evident during the early facet of the Late Classic period. There is no evidence of interaction with the Valley of Belize during either the early or late facet of the Late Classic period. Instead, utilitarian forms, modes, and decorative elements are most closely related to pottery found at southern Peten cities, including Cancuén and sites in the Pasión and Petexbatún regions. Hieroglyphic inscriptions also support close ties with these regions (see Braswell et al. 2004a, 2004b). To speculate quite a bit, it may be that the Late Classic population of Pusilha originally came from the southwestern

Peten. Alternatively, inhabitants of Pusilha may have participated in an East-West riverine trade network linking the Caribbean to the Usumacinta watershed. In short, Late Classic Pusilha was a Tepeu-sphere site sharing much with the southern Peten, some design elements with the southeastern periphery, and very little with the Belize Valley.

We have recovered a surprising amount of Terminal Classic pottery from surface and floor contexts at Pusilha. An important new arrival during the end of the 8th and early 9th centuries was Belize Red from the Belize Valley (Figure 2), demonstrating exchange relations with new regions during this time period. Fine Orange ware also was imported or locally manufactured and carved drinking vessels of the “Brandy Snifter” form also suggest ties with the northwestern Maya lowlands. Finally, the crude and unstandardized Postclassic ceramic assemblage represents a sharp technological break from Classic traditions, in a manner similar to that described for the New Town complex of the Belize Valley (Gifford 1976), the Ejar complex of Copan (Manahan 2000), and similar complexes from Cancuén (Bill et al. 2003) and the Petexbatún region (Foias 1996).

### **Epigraphic Analysis**

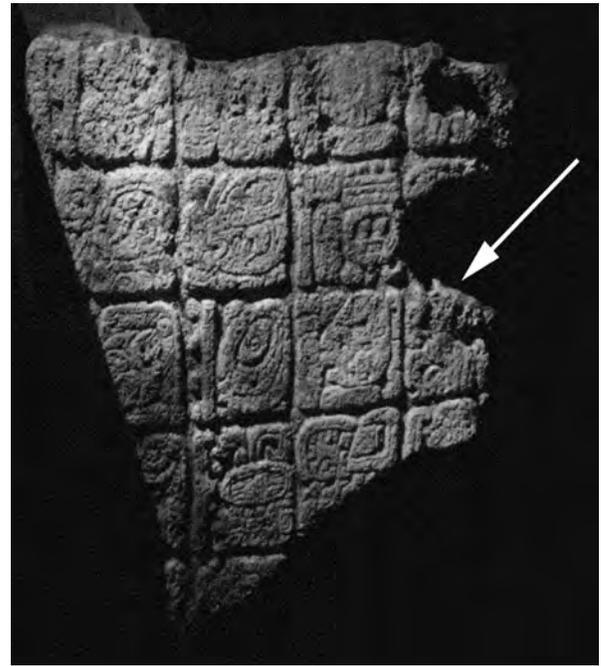
Prager’s (2002) analysis of the Pusilha hieroglyphic corpus supports Cassandra Bill’s ceramic conclusions. He has identified 39 named individuals, including eight rulers linked to the Pusilha emblem glyph and two additional probable Terminal Classic rulers. Although it once seemed likely that Ruler B of Pusilha, whose name is read as **k’ak’ u ti’ chan**, was the same individual as Ruler 11 of Copan, we



**Figure 2.** Sherd from complete Belize Red plate found in Burial 3/2. The burial and the plate date to the Terminal Classic period

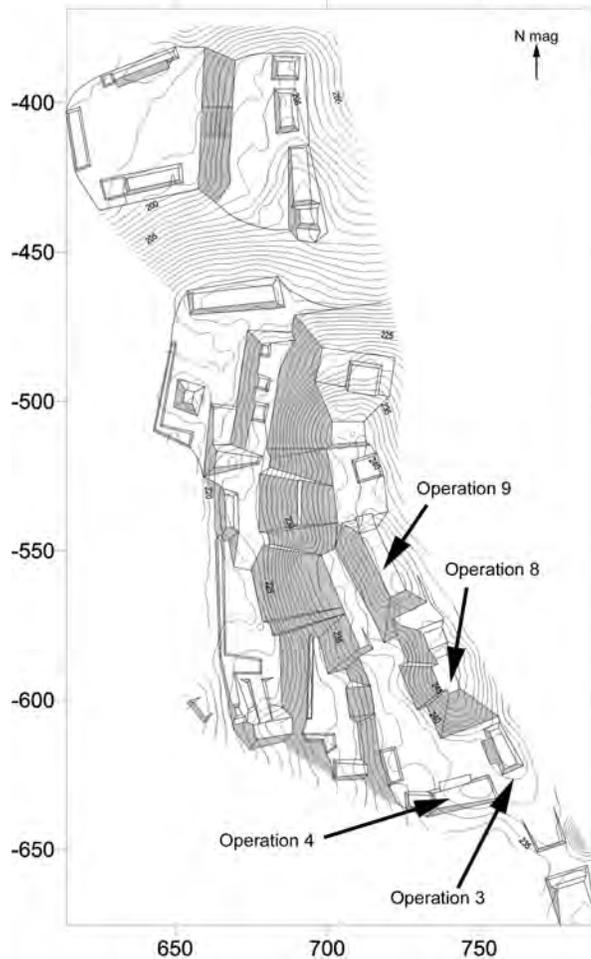
now know that they were partially contemporary individuals with different parents who happened to share the same name. Close examinations of Stela U (Figure 3), conducted this field season, suggest that a second ruler of Pusilha who lived near the end of the 8th century also shared this name. It now seems certain that Foliated **Ajaw**, a figure mentioned in many retrospective texts found at Pusilha, Copan, Tikal, and elsewhere, was not a pre-dynastic ruler of Copan but instead was a legendary figure linked somehow to the origin of kingship. Thus, neither of the two possible political connections with Copan once considered now seems likely. Although some personal names and a toponym suggest interaction with the Pasión and Petexbatún zones, there is no clear mention in the corpus of Copan, Quiriguá, Tikal, Calakmul, or any other well-known site in the Maya lowlands. Moreover, there are no known references to Pusilha in the hieroglyphic texts of these or any other site. It appears, therefore, that Pusilha was not intimately involved with the political machinations of

these important polities. Engaging again in pure conjecture, it may be that Pusilha was founded at the beginning of the Late Classic period by factions who – like the modern Q’eqchi’ – sought southern Belize as a haven against political troubles in the Peten.



**Figure 3.** Pusilha Stela U. Arrow points to the name **k’ak’ u ti’ chan**, probably a Late to Terminal Classic ruler who carried the same name as the much earlier Ruler B of Pusilha.

Two rulers of Pusilha, Ruler A and Ruler G, employed the important title **och’k’in kalo’mte’**, roughly glossed as “western lord” (we have no translation of the verbal root **kalo’m**). At Tikal and elsewhere, this title is clearly associated with the founding of new male lines of royal descent. The use of the **och’k’in kalo’mte’** title by Ruler A (apparently the first **ajaw** of Pusilha) and by Ruler G (who inherited through his mother) is consistent with this meaning. At Tikal, the title is also viewed as indicating a “high king” of extraordinary



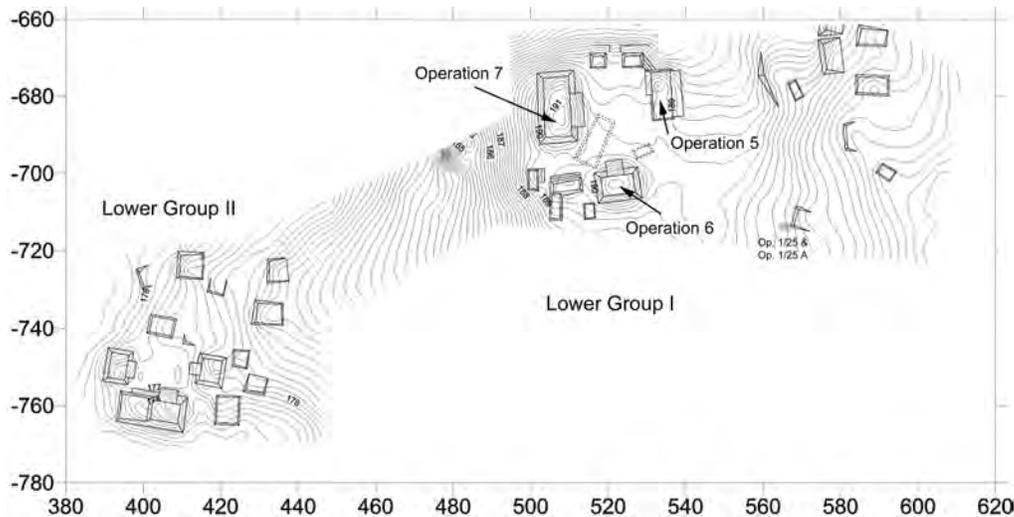
**Figure 4.** A partial map of the Gateway Hill Acropolis, completed in 2001. Location of the Operation 3, 4, 8 and 9 structures are shown; two additional terraces and many structures to the west and north, along with Ballcourt 2 and the Maya Bridge, were mapped in 2005 but have not yet been incorporated into the base map.

power, and is ambiguously associated with Teotihuacán. In addition to two uses of this possibly foreign-inspired title by rulers of Pusilha, Stela C, of which only the front is legible, displays a ruler holding a serpent bar with depictions of the Mexican storm/Venus god. We raise the issue of possible claims of a Teotihuacán affiliation because it is of relevance to the identity of the individual in the tomb excavated during the 2005 field season.

### Excavations

A total of seven structures were excavated during the 2004 and 2005 field

seasons. Four of these are located at the southern summit of Gateway Hill (Figure 4), the other three at its base. The Gateway Hill Acropolis is one of the most imposing architectural complexes in the Maya world. The hill itself is a natural feature that was substantially modified to form a massive acropolis consisting of eight distinct terraces that rise to a height of 79m; nearly the combined height of the Caana of Caracol and the Castillo of Xunantunich. The main entrance to the acropolis is found south of the ancient bridge, where two parallel stair/terrace systems rise 30 m to the first terrace. Each of the terraces support a



**Figure 5.** Lower Groups I and II showing the location of the Operation 5, 6, and 7 structures

number of range structures, and three pyramidal-like platforms are found at the top. A ramp or sacbe leads down from the first terrace to Ballcourt 2, one of four known at the site. An ancient toponym found in the Pusilha inscriptions is read as “Step Mountain.” This almost certainly refers to the acropolis itself.

### **2004 Excavations in Lower Group I: The Operation 5, 6, and 7 Structures**

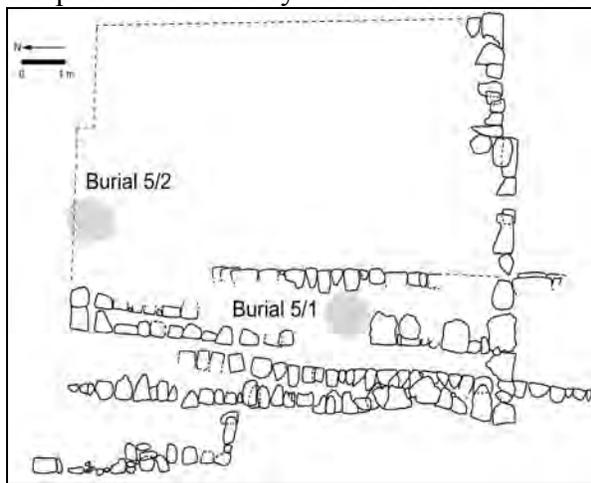
In 2004, excavations were conducted in three structures in what we call Lower Group I (Figure 5), 100m east of the southern end of the acropolis. Two platforms, the Op. 5 and Op. 6 structures, were substantially excavated, but the Op. 7 structure – encountered in a heavily looted state – was subjected only to test pitting. No architectural features, traces of a substructure, or burials or caches were discovered in the Op. 7 structure. It is interesting, however, that the only two possible Early Classic sherds that we discovered come from this test pit. It also is important to note that little evidence of Terminal Classic activity was discovered anywhere in the group, indicating that Lower Group I was built, occupied, and

abandoned during the Late Classic Period.

The Op. 5 structure is a low, poorly preserved, and simply built range structure along the western edge of Lower Group I (Figure 6). Excavations revealed that the platform was added on to the edge of the plaza platform. Two burials were encountered. Burial 5/1 consists of the partial remains of a child under 10- and probably closer to five-years old. The burial was cut into the front (western) edge of the Op. 5 structure platform, which was repaired using fill rather than facing stones. A simple shell necklace was the only grave good associated with the child. The burial is fascinating however; because the child’s deciduous incisors were inlaid with jade. Such inlays are extremely rare in milk teeth. Burial 5/2 consists of very partial remains found eroding out of the mound surface. No grave goods were associated with this individual.

The richest burial – Burial 6/1 – encountered in the group was found in the Op. 6 structure, a low pyramidal mound at the southern end of the group (Figure 7). The interment is a secondary burial; human remains were fragmentary and jumbled, and the grave goods appeared to have been

scooped out of their primary contexts and redeposited in broken and fragmentary condition. These goods consist of four vessels (one of which probably dates to the re-interment), a pyrite mirror with a fragmentary slate back, hematite inlays, jade beads, a *Spondylus* shell, and beautiful propeller-shaped ear ornaments. Also found were a white limestone baton and a paddle-shaped slate object. In the Belize Valley, these are referred to as slate “wrenches” and are presumed to be symbols of office. It is



**Figure 6.** Plan of the Operation 5 Structure, Lower Group I.

It is interesting to note that an unprovenienced carved-bone artifact that depicts the Pusilha emblem glyph also is of this shape. Burial 6/2, found in a small crypt in the structural fill south of Burial 6/1, contained the fragmentary flexed remains of a second individual. No grave goods were associated with Burial 6/2.

#### **2004 Excavations in the Acropolis: The Operation 3 and 4 Structures**

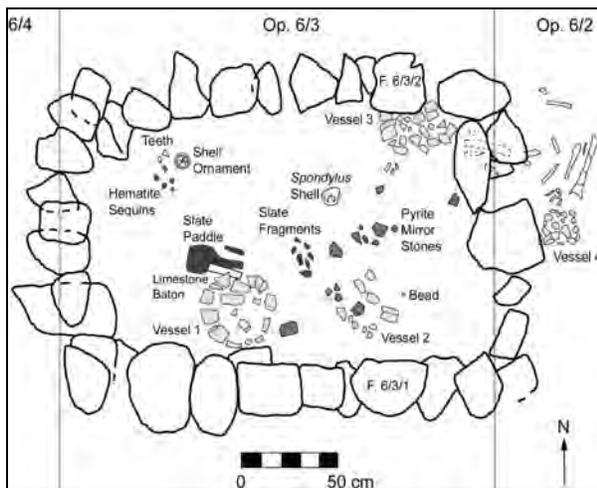
In addition to the excavations in Lower Group I, in 2004 we also excavated two range structures at the summit of the acropolis. The first, called the Op. 3 Structure, is a west-facing range structure

just south of the highest free-standing structure at Pusilha (Figure 9). The Op. 3 structure was built in one construction phase, and consists of a 2-m high platform with a central stair block flanked by two stair-side outsets. Three burials – probably relating to a single interment – were found at the summit of the structure. A low wall, built floating on structural fill within the platform itself, passed in front of all three burials, as did a temporary earthen floor, upon which – we surmise – people attended the burial rites of all three principal individuals.

Like nearly all burials at Pusilha, the central figure (Burial 3/1) was placed with his head in the north. Although not found in any well-defined crypt, his head was covered by a broken capstone. Accompanying grave goods include a plate found over his pelvis, the fragmentary remains of another vessel, and two companion heads. One of these companion heads (along with additional bones from the proximal torso) was placed at the pelvis, and the other was found near the head of the primary figure. The second companion head was very fragmentary, but five teeth contained hematite inlays or had been drilled for such inlays.

Burials 3/1A and 3/1B were placed north and south of the central figure. In the case of the northernmost burial, no crypt or chamber had been prepared for the individual. Instead, a single, large capstone was placed at waist and leg level. The position of the body was flexed with the individual lying on the left side, facing east. The grave goods associated with Burial 3/1A include two vessels in proximity to the lower extremities and mid-section of this individual. Like other paired funerary vessels at Pusilha, one was a plate and the other a drinking vessel, in this case a vase.

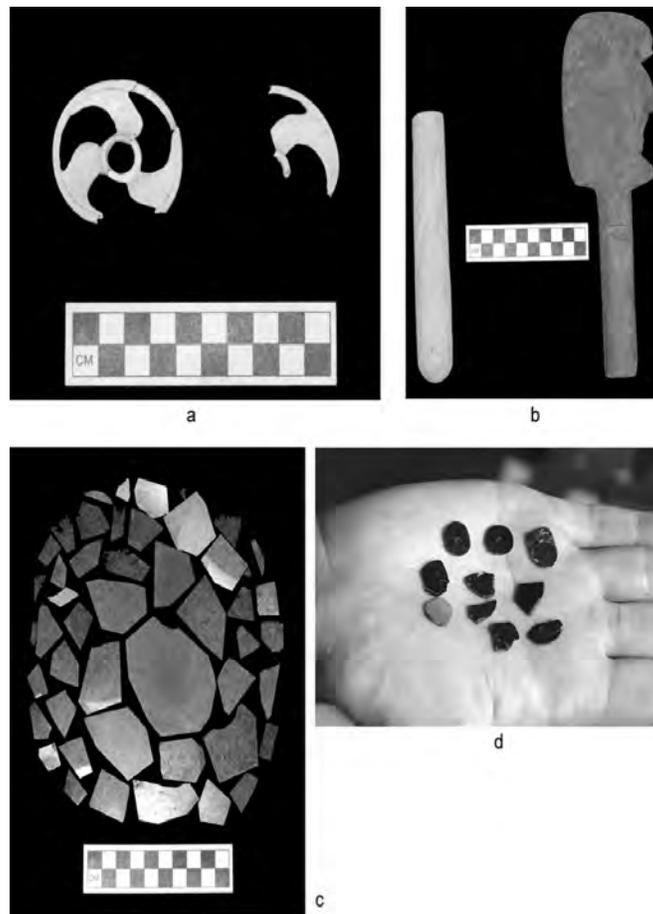
The southernmost burial, Burial 3/1B, was found south of the central figure in a simple crypt. The burial was extended, and the head of the individual was covered by a broken plate. A large cylinder vase with traces of polychrome paint also was recovered. Other grave goods encountered in Burial 3/1B include a thin fragment of a greenstone ornament, a small triangular fragment of greenstone that is polished on one side, and a single, complete forest-green bead. Additionally, 530 jute shells were recovered from this lot, as well as a bivalve fragment.



**Figure 7.** Burial 6/1 of the Operation 6 Structure, Lower Group I.

All the ceramics recovered from Burials 3/1, 3/1A, and 3/1B date to the Late Classic period, specifically Tepeu II times. A fourth burial, Burial 3/2 was found at the foot of the stairs of the Op. 3 Structure. The principal body was interred within a crypt created by limestone uprights surmounted by capstones. The crypt itself was intrusive into the level of the plaza floor. That is, the burial postdates the construction of the Op. 3 Structure. A well-preserved adult individual was found in an extended, supine position. The upper

canines and lateral incisors were all drilled for inlays, and central jade inlays were found in the upper right canine and upper left lateral incisor. Near the head, we recovered two almost complete vessels. One is a “brandy-snifter”-shaped cup carved outside with what appears to be pseudo-writing. The other is a fine red-ware plate or dish with small molded ball-shaped foot supports and a filleted basal flange. Both of these forms date to the Terminal Classic. A large, complete Belize Red plate (Figure 2) was placed at the feet of the primary individual, also providing evidence that Burial 3/2 dates to the Terminal Classic period. In close proximity to this plate were the partial remains of a second individual. The second individual again represents a “companion” and consists of several skull fragments, teeth, a few long bones, and hand bones. These partial remains were crammed in a flexed position at the feet of the primary individual. It is possible that the primary individual in Burial 3/2 is a Terminal Classic descendent of the Late Classic principal figure interred in Burial 3/1. The Op. 4 structure was badly looted just days before we began our excavations in 2004. For this reason, investigation was limited to exposing final-stage architecture and exploring a huge looter’s trench that destroyed the center and western half the structure. Unlike the other platforms described so far, the Op. 4 structure contains a substructure built on a lower plaza level. When the plaza floor was raised, the platform was extended slightly to the north and possibly east. We recovered several arm bones and an intact cranium resting immediately on top of the terminal plaza floor and beneath a capstone. Although the body was clearly left on the surface, we have designated it as Burial 4/1. The fragmentary



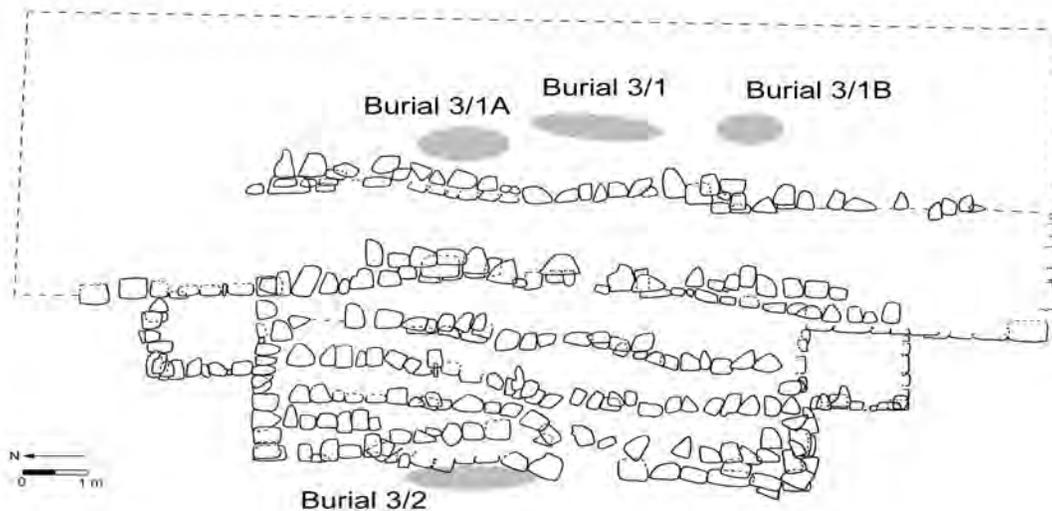
**Figure 8.** Artifacts recovered from Burial 6/1 (referred to as Burial 7 in Bill and Braswell [2005]), an elaborate crypt found in a structure 100 m west of the Gateway Hill Acropolis: (a) shell ornaments; (b) slate “wrench” and limestone baton; (c) pyrite mirror fragments; (d) hematite ornaments.

nature of the remains suggests that animals may have dragged the torso and lower extremities away for consumption.

We have exported three teeth from each of the primary individuals and companions in the Op. 3 burials, as well as the burials excavated in the Op. 4, Op. 5, and Op. 6 structures. We plan to conduct isotopic analyses to determine the place of origin of all 12 individuals, and also hope that DNA studies will provide evidence of biological relationship. In particular, we are interested in determining if the companions were revered ancestors of the principal individuals or if they were unrelated foreign captives.

### **2005 Excavations: The Operation 8 and 9 Structures**

In 2005, our excavations were limited to two large platforms: the Op. 8 and Op. 9 structures (Figure 4). The Op. 9 structure is the least-looted of three pyramidal-like structures at the summit of the Acropolis. Oddly, the Op. 9 structure contains no stair on its western side. Instead, access was provided by small stairs on the south (facing the Op. 8 structure) and the north (facing two very badly looted platforms at the northern end of the acropolis). Excavations quickly revealed that the core of the Op. 9 structure is largely bedrock, which forms the natural top of



**Figure 9.** Plan of the Operation 3 Structure, Gateway Hill Acropolis

Gateway Hill. Facing stones were added to the west side to give the appearance of a completely artificial structure. The northern end of the platform was destroyed by looters but seems to consist of a small platform. The southern end is comprised of a single, small platform built above bedrock that was gradually expanded to the north in at least three stages. The center of the Op. 9 structure consists of natural bedrock very close to the terminal surface. In its final stage, we posit that a single platform spanned the entire Op. 9 structure, covering all bedrock. No postholes were found and very few artifacts were recovered, except in an area immediately north of a looter's pit that exposed a platform wall and bedrock. Here, a large quantity of obsidian, two polished greenstone fragments, and a tooth pendant were found with some faunal remains. No human bone was recovered, suggesting that the disturbed area was not a burial. Rather than being a pyramidal platform, it seems likely that the Op. 9 structure was a largely natural feature modified to serve as an elevated access way between the Op. 8 structure and the northern end of the acropolis.

Our most intensive excavations were

conducted in the Op. 8 structure, the largest free-standing platform known at Pusilha. Unlike the Op. 9 structure, it contains a large stair on its western, or front, side. The fill of the Op. 8 structure is extremely unstable and precluded excavation below a depth of about three meters. Therefore, although no evidence of a substructure was found, we cannot completely rule out the possibility that one lies deeply buried within the platform. Four later, relatively minor modifications to the Op. 8 structure were noted. First, a large stair-side outset, resembling a buttress wall, was built against the southwestern body of the platform. Second, a smaller outset was added to the north side of the stair block, probably to stabilize it. Third, the northern end was expanded to join a low terrace abutting the Op. 9 structure. Finally, a low terrace or wall was built along the southeastern face of the platform, joining it to the Op. 3 structure and forming a room or small structure on the plaza level. Artifacts recovered from this final addition suggest that it dates to the Terminal Classic period.



**Figure 10.** Carved jade pendants from the Burial 8/4 tomb. The lower two images are of the obverse and reverse sides of the same pendant; the other two pendants (upper images) are not carved on their reverse.

The partial remains of two individuals were found shoved up against the south side of the Op. 8 structure and on the surface of the plaza. It is possible that one fragmentary set of remains, called Burial 8/2, represents the same individual identified as Burial 4/1. In sum, at the end of the occupation of the acropolis during the Terminal Classic period, at least two and possibly three individuals were left dead on the surface of the plaza.

A double interment, called Burial 8/3, was found in front of the stairs on the principal axis of the Op. 8 structure. This crypt burial contained an extended figure with two capstones over his head, a fragmentary red-ware vessel, and part of carved vessel in the “brandy-snifter” form. A second individual was found in a flexed position at the head of the extended figure.

The ceramics tentatively suggest a Terminal Classic date.



**Figure 11.** Eccentrics found associated with the Burial 8/4 tomb: (a) anthropomorphic chert eccentric; (b) pair of small obsidian eccentrics; (c) small chert eccentric; (d) large obsidian eccentric

The most important burial thus far excavated at Pusilha was found at the top of the Op. 8 structure. Here, a large tomb, called Burial 8/4, was discovered just below the seven looter’s pits that have destroyed most of the upper surface of the platform. The base of the tomb is approximately 2.5 m below this greatly disturbed surface. A single individual, consisting of very fragmentary remains, was found in what probably was originally an extended position. The fragmentary and disturbed remains suggest both antiquity and later re-entrance of the tomb. A small antechamber originally provided access to the tomb from the southeast, but broken capstones and large-fill stones found in the tomb itself

imply later re-entry from the top of the platform. Hundreds of obsidian fragments were found floating within the re-filled tomb, as well as on its floor. These may have been deposited above the capstones before the tomb was re-entered, and later were re-incorporated into fill.

Grave goods include approximately a dozen vessels, all of which were found crushed by the stones used to fill the tomb. Most were found lined up on the east and north sides of the tomb. Many are polychrome or carved vessels. One basin, west of the head and at the northwest corner of the tomb, contained 24 complete jadeite beads, a crushed bead, two carved jade ornaments (Figure 10, upper), a tubular bead, two appliqués resembling large round eyes, and many mosaic pieces made of jade. In total, 81 fragmentary and whole jade artifacts were found in the basin. The beads belong to a necklace and the two carved figures and at least some of the mosaic pieces seem to be part of the **saq hunal** headdress of a Maya ruler. Additional grave goods include two small obsidian eccentrics and a chert eccentric placed near the head, a large obsidian eccentric encountered near the center of the tomb (Figure 11b-c,d), a very large *Spondylus* shell serving as capstone for the east-facing cranium, a fragment of pyrite, and a third carved jadeite figure (Figure 10, lower), along with many more greenstone beads and a pearl bead, were found on the east side of the tomb. This double-sided pendant probably was the third and central element of the **saq hunal** headdress. A very small fragment of this last pendant was also found in the basin with the other two, suggesting that the third example was moved when the tomb was re-entered. A second *Spondylus* shell was found over the mouth and chin, and additional small greenstone and painted ceramic beads formed a necklace worn by

the deceased. Finally, a large anthropomorphic eccentric made of chert was found above and north of the tomb (Figure 11a).

The placement of the tomb, its later re-entry and backfilling, and especially the rich grave goods are consistent with an interment of a member of the royal family. The **saq hunal** headdress implies that the individual within the tomb was, in fact, an **ajaw**.

Although no hieroglyphic texts were found in the tomb, there are several intriguing hints that the **ajaw** in Burial 8/4 claimed some sort of affiliation with Teotihuacán. The three jade pendants from the tomb are carved in a peculiar style. One has snarled lips reminiscent of Tikal Stela 4 and of much earlier Olmec iconography. The four figures carved on the three pendants are all shown from a frontal position, perhaps borrowed from Teotihuacán stylistic conventions. One of the figures on the double-sided pendant has a face rendered in a particularly strong Teotihuacán style (Figure 10, lower left), and also has a Teotihuacán headdress. Nevertheless, it is probable that Maya artisans produced all the pendants. Despite the use of foreign conventions and limited Teotihuacán iconographic content, the overall effect of the three pieces is Maya in character.

The anthropomorphic chert eccentric (Figure 11a) is somewhat reminiscent of much smaller obsidian eccentrics that are well-known from Teotihuacán itself, and that also have been found at Altun Ha. At Teotihuacán, such anthropomorphic eccentrics appear to represent symbolic, rather than actual, human sacrifice.



**Figure 12.** Ceramic model of a face wearing central Mexican-style goggles. Provenience is Op. 8/14/4.

The large obsidian eccentric is made of a very dark material (Figure 11d), perhaps imported from central Mexico. But because of the thickness of the piece, it can be definitively sourced only by geochemical means. A final clue that the inhabitant of Burial 8/4 claimed some sort of connection with Teotihuacán can be seen in a modeled clay fragment found elsewhere in the Op. 8 excavations (Figure 12). This figure clearly wears the goggles of the central Mexican storm, Venus, and war god. It does not seem coincidental that the only representation of this sort from Pusilha comes from the same structure as the Burial 8/4 tomb. Hieroglyphic texts, it should be recalled, describe two rulers as using the **och'k'in kalo'mte'** title, which also may have some association with Teotihuacán. In sum, although the evidence is far from definitive, we tentatively suggest that the individual in the Burial 8/4 tomb was either: (1) the dynastic founder himself, **k'awil chan k'inich**, or (2) Ruler G. As ceramic studies and other analyses continue, we hope

to conclusively identify the individual. Other royal tombs have been found at sites such as Altun Ha and Xunantunich, but this may be the first time that the tomb and mortal remains of an ancient Maya ruler whose exploits are described in hieroglyphic texts have been discovered in Belize.

### Conclusions

Four field seasons of archaeological and epigraphic investigations at Pusilha have begun to answer our research questions, although the answers are not what we originally expected. Some ceramic data suggest an early Late Classic connection with Copan and other sites in the southeastern Mesoamerican periphery, but much stronger ties with the southern and southwestern Peten are evinced by both ceramic and epigraphic analysis. Our best guess is that most of the early settlers of Pusilha came from the west rather than from the southeast. Moreover, the site continued to maintain economic ties with the southern and southwestern Peten throughout most of its history, apparently eschewing trade with the Valley of Belize until the Terminal Classic. “Pull” factors that may have encouraged the dynastic founder **k'awil chan k'inich** to come to Pusilha include available and under-inhabited land of high fertility, as well as the desire to control an important trade route between the Caribbean Sea and Usumacinta watershed. The importance of the foothills of the Maya mountains as a place where caves drew religious pilgrims also may have been a factor. We further speculate that “push” factors for migration may have included political instability and warfare in the southwestern Peten. Although we have only negative evidence, it seems as though the rulers of Pusilha deliberately kept themselves distant from the political

struggles between both Tikal and Calakmul and Copan and Quiriguá. Many analogous “push” and “pull” factors exist today, and have contributed greatly to the influx of Q’eqchi’ Maya in Toledo District.

With the discovery of the tomb of one of the rulers of Pusilha, we now have a rich variety of ceramic and lithic artifacts that in future years may provide further data relevant to the question of the origin of Pusilha and the migration of what became the largest Classic-period community of southern Belize.

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