
6 **LATE AND TERMINAL CLASSIC OCCUPATION OF PUSILHA, TOLEDO DISTRICT, BELIZE SITE PLANNING, BURIAL PATTERNS, AND COSMOLOGY**

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Archaeological investigations at Pusilha, Toledo District, Belize have revealed an occupational history beginning shortly before A.D. 600 and lasting well into the Terminal Classic period. Site planning, architecture, and even burial patterns of the Late and Terminal Classic periods reflect important cosmological principles shared by the Classic Maya. Nevertheless, in southern Belize, a rather distinct and isolated archaeological region, the way these shared principles were manifested was unique.

Introduction

Since 2001, the Pusilha Archaeological Project has investigated ancient economy and political history at Pusilha, Toledo District, Belize (Bill and Braswell 2005; Braswell et al. 2004, 2005; Braswell and Gibbs 2006). Located in the southwestern corner of the country, merely 1,500 m east of the border with Guatemala and within the Q'eqchi' village of San Benito Poite, Pusilha is the largest ancient Maya city of southern Belize (Figure 1). To date, project members have surveyed nearly 3 km² of the settlement, which we estimate to have covered approximately 5 to 6km² (Figure 2). During survey, 105 structural groups—containing a total of about 500 mound and terrace features—have been mapped. In 2002, we conducted a test-pitting program designed to recover a representative sample of ceramics and other artifacts from different portions of the ancient city. In 2002, 2004, and 2005, we conducted extensive horizontal excavations in seven structures and tested an eighth platform. Throughout our project, Christian Prager, co-director and project epigrapher, has drawn, cataloged, and analyzed the extensive hieroglyphic corpus of the site, consisting of 23 stelae a hieroglyphic stair, an inscribed ballcourt marker, and 18 miscellaneous fragments (Figure 3).

The Political History of Pusilha

Our interest in Pusilha grew out of research conducted by co-director Cassandra Bill and I at Copan, Honduras. Since the rediscovery of Pusilha in 1927, several scholars have posited a close relationship between the Belizean city and the Copan-Quirigua region. Marcus (1992) argued that Pusilha began as a small and independent chiefdom during the Early Classic, was annexed by the rapidly expanding Copan polity, and later regained its independence during the 8th century in a manner very similar to that proposed for Quirigua. But as we have described at previous symposia, Marcus' (1993) Dynamic Model of state formation does not seem to apply to Pusilha quite the way we once thought, and evidence of both political and economic connections with Copan are quite limited. For this reason, we have developed a new narrative for the political history of Pusilha, one that emphasizes local development without foreign control (Braswell et al. 2004).

An evanescent Early Classic presence in the Pusilha region is demonstrated only by pottery collected from the numerous caves found in the hills near the site. Permanent settlement began late in the 6th century A.D., when colonists arrived from the southwestern Peten. Bill's (in Bill and Braswell 2005) analyses reveal the

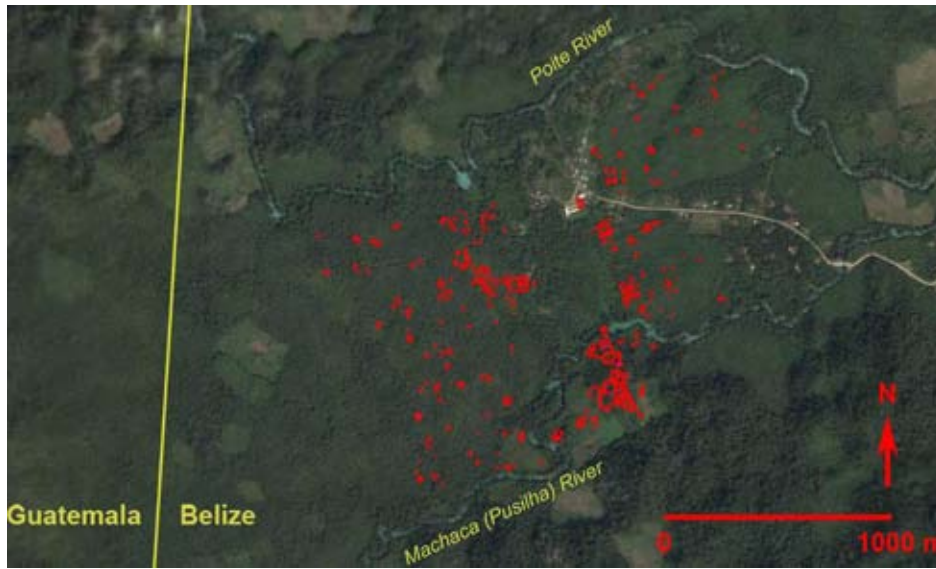


Figure 1. The ruins of Pusilha, Toledo District, Belize. Border with Guatemala is shown in yellow, the modern village of San Benito Poite is visible.

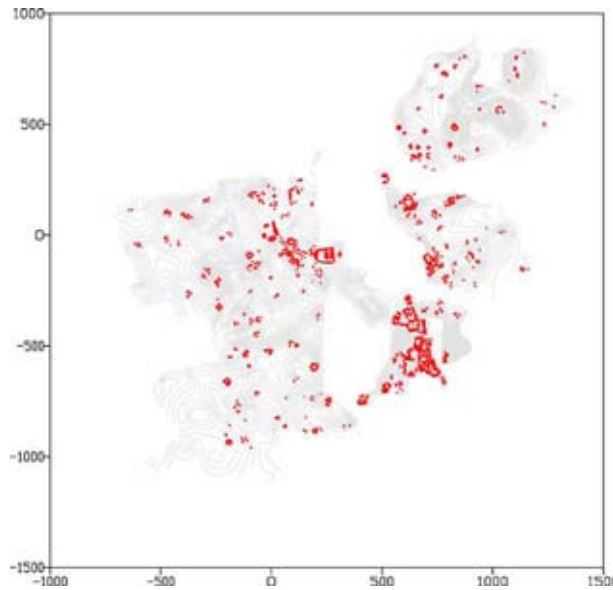


Figure 2. Partial map of Pusilha. Contour interval is 1m, scale in meters as measured from datum in Stela Plaza.

strongest ceramic ties with that region (and much stronger ties, in general, with Tepeu sites in the Peten rather than with the southeastern Maya periphery). Moreover, Prager's epigraphic studies have discovered names in the Pusilha corpus that were also used in the Petexbatun region (Braswell et al. 2004, 2005).

Prager has identified 39 individuals in the hieroglyphic corpus of Pusilha. Eight to ten of these are *ajawob* or divine kings. The dynastic founder of Pusilha, whom we call Ruler A and whose name is read **k'awil chan k'inich**, was inaugurated in A.D. 570. He signaled his status as the founder of a dynasty by employing the **och'k'in**

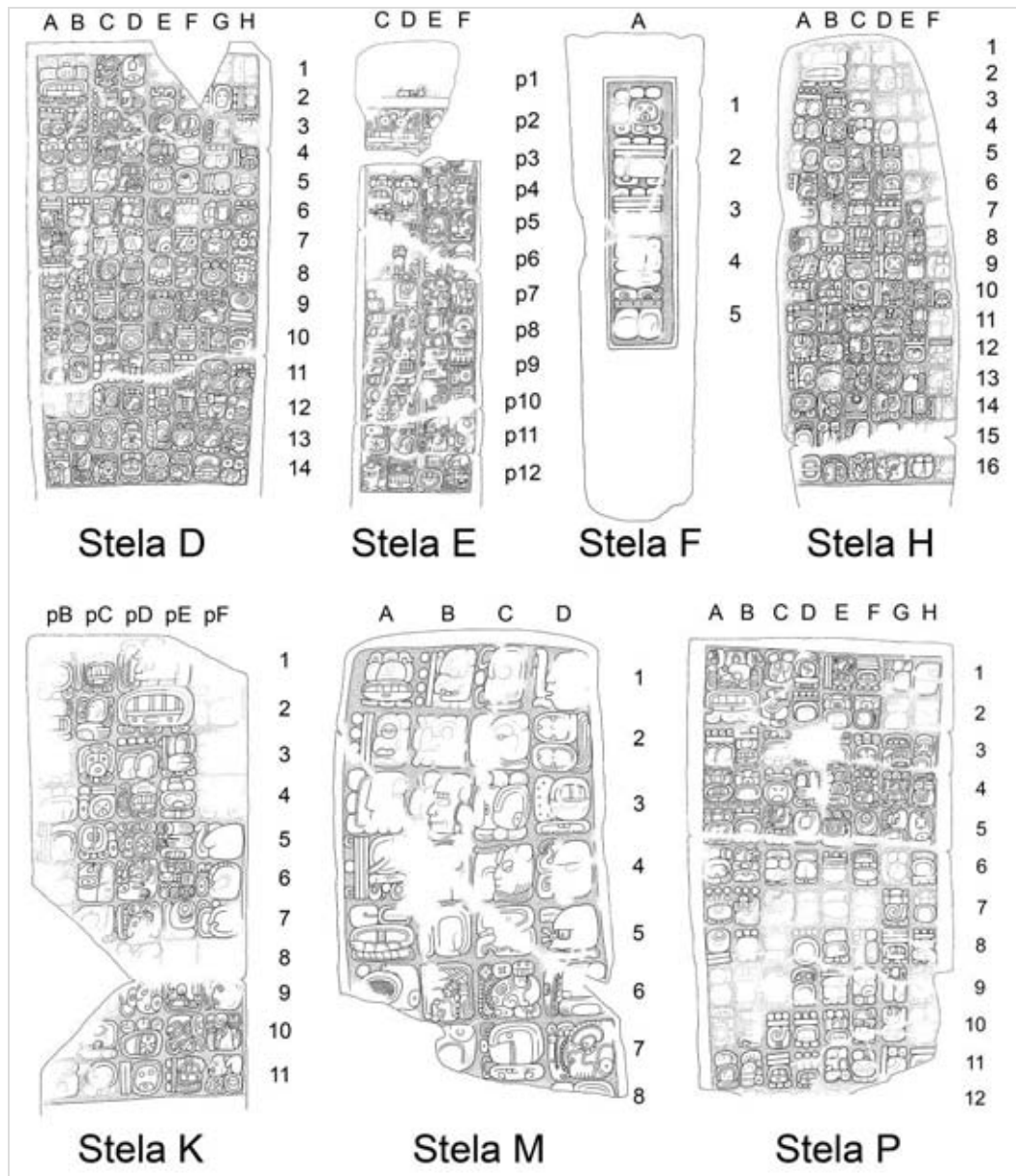


Figure 3. Seven stelae from the Stela Plaza, Pusilha (drawing by Christian M. Prager).

k'alomte' title. During his long rule, Ruler A appears to have formed limited economic and ambassadorial ties with Copan. Among the ceramics recovered by the British Museum and by our own project are a small number of sherds that exhibit motifs known principally from western Honduras and eastern El Salvador. Moreover, the dynastic founder of Pusilha named his firstborn son - Pusilha Ruler B - after Copan Ruler 11. But it is important to stress that these ceramic

and epigraphic ties are limited, not only in the frequency of their appearance, but also in time. After the mid-seventh century, evidence for this interaction ceases. Again, ceramic data, as well as obsidian procurement patterns and iconographic evidence, reveal much closer affiliations with the Peten than with any other region throughout the Late Classic period (Braswell et al. 2005).

Ruler F, named **ix ich'ak ... k'inich**, was a female *ajaw* who ruled Pusilha in her own right. It is likely that she ruled only long enough for her son, whose father was not a divine king, to accede to the throne. In an attempt to legitimize his rule, Ruler G, the son and successor of this woman *ajaw*, used the important title **ochk'in k'alomte**, again implying the founding of a new royal line. Ruler G died between A.D. 731 and 751 (Braswell et al. 2005).

Three late monuments describe the actions of two or possibly three later kings of Pusilha who ruled between A.D. 751 and A.D. 798. But the epigraphic record for the end of the Late Classic and the beginning of the Terminal Classic is scanty compared to earlier periods. What happened to the population of Pusilha during the 9th century? To begin with, it is quite possible that population levels dropped at this time, as they did throughout the southern and central Maya lowlands. Nonetheless, excavations have revealed a robust Terminal Classic occupation. During this period, many important groups, including the Gateway Hill Acropolis, remained populated. Moho Plaza, located in the southwestern periphery of the site and where the Hieroglyphic Stair and Ballcourts III and IV are found, was built and occupied at this time. The larger of these two ballcourts is constructed on an East-West axis, an orientation characteristic of the Terminal Classic and later periods. In some ways, Moho Plaza seems to have replaced much of the Late Classic city and conflated within its boundaries architectural features that in earlier times were distributed in different structural groups.

Excavations in the Moho Plaza and elsewhere have revealed significant evidence, in the form of imported Belize Red vessels, of economic ties with western Belize during the Terminal Classic (Braswell et al. 2004). Evidence of

interaction with the Belize Valley is not present before this time. Ceramic forms and a few sherds of Fine Orange ware demonstrate new relations with the northwest Maya region, as does the importation of obsidian from the Mexican source of Zaragoza, Puebla.

It is also distinctly possible that by about A.D. 800, large segments of the population of Pusilha moved to a new location in southern Belize. Lubaantun, a site whose major architecture was built near the end of the Late Classic and a location occupied well into the Terminal Classic period (Hammond 1975), may have been one place where people from Pusilha moved. Certain aspects of the utilitarian ceramic inventory and the practice of making ocarinas in the form of figurines suggest relations between that site and Pusilha. More importantly, the basic site plan of Lubaantun, which also is a hilltop citadel, is very similar to that of Pusilha's Gateway Hill Acropolis. The two most imposing structures of each acropolis are located on their eastern edges and are both west-facing platforms. The western portions of each acropolis consist of a more open arrangement of patio groups built on different levels. The acropolis of Pusilha is similar enough to that of Lubaantun that I suspect the former may have been the architectural inspiration for the latter.

Excavations in a platform at Pusilha that we call the Bulldozed Mound reveal an even later Postclassic occupation (Braswell et al. 2004). Ceramics dating to this period are crude and un-standardized in ways reminiscent of the Ejar complex of Copan, the Newtown complex of the Belize Valley, and various other Early Postclassic ceramic complexes from the southern Peten (Bill and Braswell 2005). Thus, at least small numbers of people occupied Pusilha at a time well after the Maya Collapse of the late 8th and early 9th centuries.

One of the most striking aspects of the political history of Pusilha is that the extensive hieroglyphic corpus never once mentions Tikal, Calakmul, Caracol, Copan, Quirigua, or even nearby Nimli Punit (Braswell et al. 2004). Rival polities and toponyms are named in connection with warfare events, but not one is a place whose location is known. Although many of the original inhabitants of Pusilha almost certainly came from the southern Peten, the lack of references to large and powerful sites in that region suggests that the royal family of Pusilha chose to distance itself from the political machinations that permeated the Maya lowlands during the 7th through 9th centuries. We do not, therefore, interpret the history of Pusilha in terms of Marcus' Dynamic Model (in which the development of state-level organization at Pusilha could be seen as the result of first incorporation into and later fragmentation of the Copan state), nor do we consider to be relevant Martin and Grube's Superstate Model (in which the political affairs of many lowland polities were manipulated in a hegemonic fashion by Tikal or Calakmul). Instead, Pusilha is best viewed as a nonaligned polity that developed independently in a generally under-populated and somewhat peripheral region of the Maya lowlands. That is, we propose that there was a "third way" to Maya political development, one that entailed neither hegemonic nor direct political control. Some years ago, Leventhal (1990) described southern Belize as an archaeological region distinct from the rest of the lowlands. One reason that material culture may have developed in a unique and somewhat divergent manner in southern Belize is that the inhabitants of the region maintained political independence from their larger neighbors throughout the Late Classic period.

Site Planning at Pusilha

I would like to emphasize several aspects of material and ideological culture at Pusilha that link the city in some respects to the Peten, but also help to define southern Belize as a region quite distinct from the rest of the southern and central Maya lowlands. In particular, I would like to stress an aspect of our research that has not yet been described in detail, the results of our settlement survey. I will also discuss several burials excavated by the project with a special emphasis on how they relate to site planning and cosmological principles. The map shown in Figure 2 is still incomplete. The vacant north-south strip running down the center of the map has yet to be surveyed, and contains at least three large groups of structures. Moreover, the limits of the site still need to be defined, particularly on the northern side of the Poite River and towards the Guatemalan border.

Years ago, Morley (1938) noted that one important feature characteristic of inscriptions from southern Belize is that they include erroneous or otherwise distinctive Lunar Series data. In Leventhal's (1990) definition of the southern Belize region, he chooses to focus on architectural features. He notes that the ballcourts of southern Belize tend to be located within walled enclosures that separate the entirety of the ballcourt as well as other auxiliary structures from outlying areas. Leventhal also discusses how natural features of the landscape, particularly hills and large boulders, were incorporated into architectural constructions. The effect, he writes, is rather like a "Hollywood set," consisting primarily of cut-stone facades and a more limited use of fill than is found in many other regions. Such construction is often viewed as a way to save labor. But it is important to stress that the most time-consuming aspect of construction is cutting stone blocks to face structures or natural

features, not the gathering and placing of fill. Moreover, at Pusilha, the deliberate incorporation of natural features such as boulders into architecture seems to have served a religious function.

Finally, Leventhal (1990) also mentions that tombs in the southern Belize region were often re-used, a pattern also noted at nearby Caracol and at Minanha. Although we have excavated no tombs at Pusilha that were clearly used for sequential burials, at least one major tomb was reopened and resealed, and another elaborate crypt is a secondary burial.

Equally important in defining the southern Belize region are features common at other Maya sites that are lacking or rare in southern Belize. An important and well-known feature of southern Belize architecture is the lack of vaulted superstructures and tombs. A second feature that is quite rare in southern Belize is the E-group or astronomical commemoration group. The paucity of E-groups, many of the best known of which are Late Preclassic in date, may not seem particularly surprising in a region where virtually all known architecture dates to the Late and Terminal Classic periods, but it should be recalled that in the neighboring southern Peten, particularly in the Dolores Valley, Juan Pedro Laporte has discovered and mapped more than a hundred E-groups dating to precisely this period.

Related to the lack of E-groups is a difference in burial patterns. In western Belize and eastern Peten, a common pattern is to place the principal tomb in a pyramidal structure on the eastern edge of a plaza group. In many cases, these “ancestor shrines” are also part of an E-group. In southern Belize, burials are indeed present in and in front of eastern structures. But in many cases these are range platforms that likely supported residences or other buildings. Moreover, important burials and

offerings are also found associated with the northern, southern and western structures of a group.

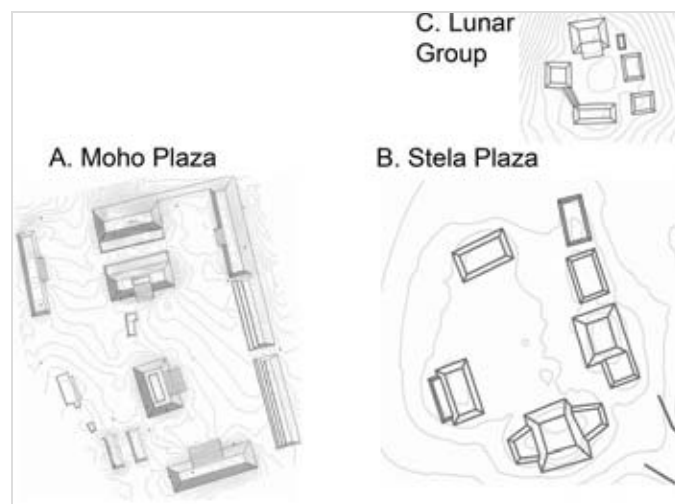


Figure 4. Three “Special Function Groups” at Pusilha, shown at the same scale. Contour interval is 1 m, except in (A) where it is 20 cm.

“Special Function Groups” at Pusilha

Survey has revealed a distinct architectural pattern at Pusilha, what I call the “Special Function Group” (Figure 4). Unlike habitation groups, built around one or more open patios oriented with the natural topography, Special Function Groups are built on a NNW-SSE alignment. As Ivan Šprajc (personal communication, 2004) has noted, this particular alignment is quite unusual for Mesoamerica; a more typical pattern is NNE-SSW. The archetypal pattern for a Special Function Group has three structures defining the eastern side of a patio. The northern two of these eastern platforms may have supported range structures. The southernmost (not the central) of the eastern platforms is generally the highest, and may be square rather than rectangular in plan. The two principal structures (often square at the base) are located to the north and south of the patio, and a single range structure is found on the western edge of the platform. The western side of the patio is quite open in comparison

to the eastern side. At least three Special Function Groups are known at Pusilha: The Lunar Group, near the northeast corner of our map, the Stela Plaza, and the Moho Plaza, located just off the far southwest corner of the map.

Although built on the same axis and with the same general plan as the Stela Group and Lunar Group, the Moho Plaza is somewhat aberrant from the other two examples in four respects. First, the northern principal structure is an east-west ballcourt rather than a pyramidal mound. Second, the southern principal structure, although quite high, is rectangular and contains a hieroglyphic stair. Third, an additional large structure is located in the center of the open plaza. Finally, the Moho Plaza is built on low-lying terrain rather than on a commanding hilltop.

I have called these “Special Function Groups” not only because of their layout, but also because of the artifacts found in the two examples where we have conducted test-pitting operations. First, and most obvious, the Moho Plaza and the Stela Plaza contain carved sculpture with hieroglyphic inscriptions. In addition to the Hieroglyphic Stair, three carved ballcourt markers were found in the ballcourt. Second, ceramics from these groups are generally not utilitarian in character. The large and numerous jars, *tinajas*, basins, *ollas*, and serving plates found in most of our excavations are uncommon by comparison in the Stela Group and Moho Plaza. Instead, incense-burner fragments are quite common.

Third, animal bones and river-snail shells -nearly as ubiquitous as pottery sherds in residential areas of the site - are entirely absent from our collections from the Stela Plaza and Moho Plaza. Thus, the preparation and consumption of food do not seem to have been important functions in the two Special Function Groups where we have conducted excavations. One conjecture that

needs to be tested through further survey is that the Special Function Groups somehow indicate the corners and center of the site, in a manner similar to the U-shaped groups of Copan.

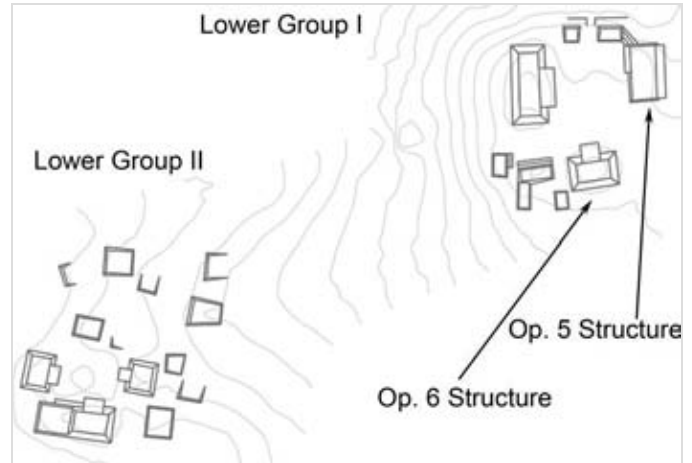


Figure 5. Lower Groups I and II, located 150 m southwest of the Gateway Hill Acropolis. Contour interval is 1 m.

Directionality and Height

Although the Special Function Groups of Pusilha are built on a plan and according to an axis not known outside of southern Belize, other more complex aspects of site planning do reflect cosmological notions shared throughout the Maya lowlands (Braswell et al. 2004, 2005). The clearest example can be seen in how the Stela Plaza Group articulates with Ballcourt I. Here, the Stela Plaza, with its row of monuments depicting rulers and describing their exploits, is located to the northwest and is conceptual linked to the heavens, divine kingship, and the northern side of the world. For the Maya, ballcourts were associated with death, the south, and the underworld. The Stela Group is connected to the ballcourt by a 150m long *sacbe*. On both sides of the middle of the *sacbe* and at an intermediate height are residential groups that may represent our own world. The *sacbe*, therefore, connects and separates the three worlds much like the World Tree of

Maya mythology. An important concept of the plan of this part of the site is that not only does it reflect Maya cosmological notions of directionality and the universe, but also it expresses these notions in three dimensions. The Stela Group (representing the heavens) is some 12m higher on the hill than Ballcourt I (representing the underworld), and the residential groups are at an intermediate altitude.

Other Important Groups

At least three other groups share some but not all of the features of the Special Function groups. In these cases, the portion of each larger group that shares one or more of the features of a Special Function Group is located on the highest terrain and forms the northernmost cluster of structures defining the greater group. Again, both altitude and the north are associated with the heavens, so it is plausible that these other groups (rather than eastern shrines of the sort found in the Belize Valley) were places of ancestor veneration. We have excavated in two of these: Lower Group I and the Pottery Cave Group and ample evidence of household and ritual activities were recovered, so their use was more general than that of the Special Function Groups.

We conducted extensive excavations of two structures in Lower Group I: the eastern range platform (called the Op. 5 Structure), and the southern pyramidal platform (or Op. 6 Structure; Figure 5) (Braswell et al. 2005). Both structures contained two burials. The most elaborate one was found not in the eastern structure, but in the southern one. This crypt contained the remains of an individual with inlaid teeth, but many of the important skeletal elements were missing. For this reason, we interpret it as a re-interment or other secondary burial. Symbols of high office found in the crypt include a white limestone baton, a slate “paddle” or

“wrench,” and a pyrite mirror most often associated with warriors. It is likely the burial of a Late Classic non-royal functionary who lived below and in the shadow of the acropolis (Braswell et al. 2005).

The Gateway Hill Acropolis

The most important architectural group at Pusilha is the Gateway Hill Acropolis (Figure 6). An ancient toponym known from the Pusilha hieroglyphic corpus consists of a set of stairs and the glyph witz or ‘mountain.’ Rising vertically some 79m from the base of the ancient Maya bridge, the Gateway Hill Acropolis is indeed a stepped mountain. Faced with cut-stones and viewed suddenly from a canoe passing beneath the Maya Bridge, it must have been one of the most imposing acropoli in the Maya world.



Figure 6. Gateway Hill Acropolis, showing locations of Operation 8 and Operation 9 Structures. Contour interval is 1 m. Large boulder features are shown in gray and pink

The orientation of the Gateway Hill Acropolis follows that of the natural hill on which it is built: NNW to SSE. The

orientation of the Special Function Groups, therefore, mimics the natural axis of the acropolis. Two large boulders are centered on the northern face of the acropolis just south of the Maya bridge and on the climb leading up to the first terrace. In front of each boulder is a platform where perhaps religious activities were conducted. Numerous small and shallow cavities have been dug beneath each boulder, and it is easy to imagine that incense was burned and offerings were placed in them, in a manner similar to that practiced today in the Maya highlands. The natural orientation of these boulders also reflects the axis of both the Gateway Hill Acropolis and of the Special Function Groups. Two sets of stairs and terraced ramps symmetrically flank the boulders and lead up to the first terrace. A short *sacbe* or ramp leads 20m down from this first terrace to the south end of Ballcourt II, which is bordered immediately to the west by the Machaca or Pusilha River. Thus, Ballcourt II (associated with the underworld) is at the lowest level of the acropolis, it is connected by a *sacbe* to a terrace with range platforms (which may have supported dwellings), and some 50m above the terrace are the large structures where royal burials are located. Although the compass directionality is reversed, the vertical pattern of ballcourt/living space/ancestor worship is the same as found in the Stela Plaza-Ballcourt I complex.

From the first terrace, an eastern stair rising to the second terrace provides access to the higher portions of the acropolis. Here, three platforms - the highest of which is in the south, as in a Special Function Group - flank the eastern side of the terrace. Two more large boulders form the natural gateway that gives the hill its modern name. A long set of poorly preserved stairs leads to the fourth terrace and eventually to the base of the northernmost and lowest of three high structures whose westward orientation, axis,

and relative size again reflect the pattern seen in the Special Function groups.

The northernmost platform has been subjected to horrific looting and at least three (but probably more) royal tombs have been opened and robbed. During the 2005 field season, we excavated both the central platform, which we call the Op. 9 Structure, and the southern pyramid or Op. 8 Structure. The Op. 9 Structure is not a true pyramid, but is the natural top of the hill. Its western side is faced with cut masonry and does not contain a stair; instead, there are steps on its northern and narrow face. The Op. 9 Structure served, therefore, as an elevated passageway linking the top of the northern pyramid to the Op. 8 Structure.

In 2005, we also excavated the Op. 8 Structure, the highest point and largest platform in Gateway Hill Acropolis (Braswell et al. 2005). Two important burials were found associated with the structure, and show how the same cosmological principles that determined site planning also are reflected in mortuary patterns.

The Op. 8/3 Crypt and Op. 8/4 Tomb

In front of the stair of the Op. 8 Structure and on the center line of the building, we discovered a simple crypt burial containing two individuals (Figure 7). The single ceramic vessel in the interment dates to the late 8th or early 9th century. The principal figure was encountered in an extended position, and an accompanying figure was flexed. As in all but one of the burials we have excavated, the heads of each figure point north, or - more correctly - are on the same alignment as the Gateway Hill Acropolis and the Special Function Groups. This orientation probably reflects not only ideas about the heavens, but also the concept of verticality that conceptually links north and up. Grave goods include an incised pyraform vessel to the east of the principal

individual, and the accompanying figure located to the north. This pattern, of grave goods to the north and east, is common at Pusilha.

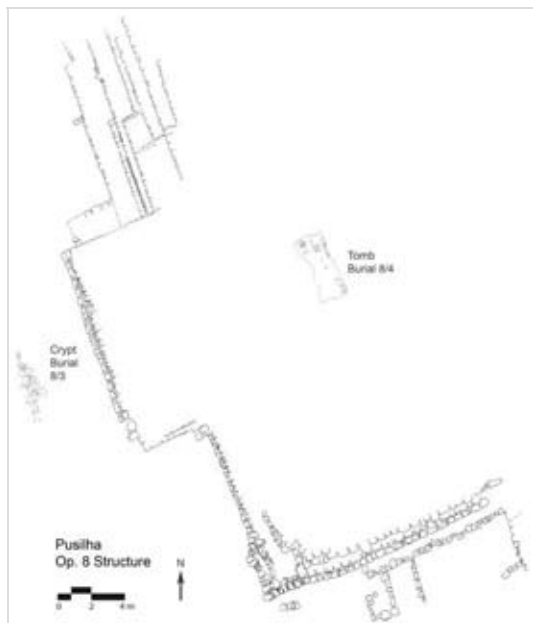


Figure 7. Operation 8 Structure, showing locations of double crypt Burial 8/3 and royal tomb Burial 8/4.

In 2005 we also discovered a royal tomb in the Op. 8 Structure. Photographs have been published of some of the artifacts found in and around the tomb (Braswell et al. 2005), including eccentrics made of chert and obsidian, a multitude of jade beads, the three diadems that formed a royal saq hunal headdress, and a polychrome tripod plate. Iconographic elements borrowed from Teotihuacan link some of the items in and around the tomb most closely to the first and the seventh rulers. The 14 vessels are late Tepeu 2 in form and decoration. They are most consistent in date with Ruler G, who died some time between A.D. 731 and 751. If our identification is correct, this is the first Belizean ruler to be excavated whose name is known and whose exploits are described in hieroglyphic texts.

With the exception of items of personal adornment, the distribution of grave goods within the tomb follows the

same pattern described for the crypt. Thirteen of the ceramic vessels were found along the eastern side of the tomb, a direction associated with resurrection. These 13 vessels and the food they contained therefore awaited the rebirth of the king from the underworld and his subsequent journey to the 13 levels of heaven. A second interesting pattern in the linear arrangement of these vessels was noted by Cassandra Bill (personal communication 2006). Polychrome and light-colored vessels were placed toward the north while black and dark brown vessels were located toward the south end of the eastern wall of the tomb. In this case, color associations may also indicate directions: north associated with light and color, south with darkness.

The fourteenth vessel, a large and crudely made basin containing more than 80 items of jade, was discovered on the north side of the tomb: a direction associated with the heavens. Two small obsidian eccentrics were also found in the north. In contrast, no offerings were encountered along either the west or south walls, directions associated with death and the underworld.

A final observation is that the tomb was reopened in antiquity. Rather than entering from the antechamber, the capstones spanning the tomb were removed, and some items - including one of the three jade diadems forming the royal headdress - were moved. Although there is no evidence of tomb reuse, a pattern cited by Leventhal (1990) as characteristic of the southern Belize region, but also known at Caracol, the royal tomb of Pusilha and the secondary burial in the elaborate crypt of Lower Group I indicate that interments were revisited.

Conclusion

Pusilha is a southern Peten site, with close ceramic, epigraphic, and iconographic ties to the Rio Pasion and Petexbatun

regions. It also shares certain cosmological ideas - the association of north and up with the heavens, south with the ballgame and underworld, and east with the emerging sun and resurrection - with most of the Maya region. But, like other sites in somewhat isolated and peripheral southern Belize, the inhabitants of Pusilha developed a distinct regional tradition that is expressed in burial practices, architectural forms, and site planning. The long independence of the southern Belize region no doubt contributed to the development of this tradition.

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