The Distribution and Significance of E Groups
A Historical Background and Introduction

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Over the past century, Maya architectural groups composed of a raised eastern platform that supported three structures and faced one western pyramid across a public plaza have come to be recognized as nearly ubiquitous in the Southern Lowlands. These complexes, which are called “E Groups,” have been correlated with archaeoastronomical alignments and features related to horizon-based calendar observation, measurement, and seasonal celebration. Similar to the patterning evident in other culture’s city or town centers, the early Maya had an ideal in mind for their main squares, recalling cosmologically based myth and ritual, with permutations or custom designs that made each community’s ritual architecture unique and awe-inspiring. Like colonial (1675–1775 CE) New England town squares, where escaped livestock were corralled in a central pasture and a number of the administrative or religious buildings faced this “green,” Maya centers were organized around an open plaza with origins in their agricultural community life. This chapter examines the historiography of scholarly work on E Groups, from 1924 onward, in an effort to provide a proper context for the rich and varied data on the distribution and significance of this important architectural type.

E Groups embody far more than simply a record of the sun’s solstices, equinoxes, and zenith passages. Research over the last twenty-five years increasingly supports the view that they form the earliest identifiable architectural plan at many Maya centers. Reconnaissance and site survey shows that they are widely distributed throughout the Maya Lowlands. E Groups are distinctly clustered in the traditional Maya heartland of Guatemala’s Petén, presaging the Late Classic period (550–800 CE) florescence in this same region (Figure 1.1). The adjacent parts of Mexico north of the Guatemalan border and the frontier lands of Belize to the east of Petén also have
important sites with E Groups that are often as ancient and enduring as those found in the heartland. Intriguing outliers exist farther afield, with examples being noted from the Mexican sites of Chiapa de Corzo, Chiapas, and Comalcalco, Tabasco.

This volume is an opportunity for many of the researchers engaged in the study of E Groups and the origins and development of Lowland Maya civic-religious architecture to take comparative stock of what is known and to chart a course for future investigation. This is a rapidly expanding area of inquiry in Maya studies, in part because of a current emphasis on early centers and communities in the Lowlands. This volume represents a renewed
effort to systematize and synthesize perspectives on the origins and development of Lowland Maya ceremony and centers. Through an examination of E Groups, it potentially becomes possible to understand how the Maya harnessed their beliefs and insights about the natural world to the tasks of living in increasingly complex societies.

Background

If we look at Frederick Law Olmsted’s design for Central Park in New York City (Rogers 1972; Rosenzweig and Blackmar 1992), how many of us recognize its origins in small New England farming towns as a place for loose livestock to be penned up while waiting for their owners to reclaim them? Speaking of New York City, with its streets oriented on a strict grid aligned with the cardinal directions, how many of us have watched the hierophantic sun rise or set along those urban canyons and recalled our Julian system of calendar reckoning and its seasonal links to an agricultural past? Similarly, even archaeologists with the benefit of hindsight grapple with the benefit of hindsight grapple with seeing a clear picture of the origins of E Group architecture from the Maya region. For this reason, the researchers represented in this book have all wrestled with a large corpus of literature that is available on Maya ceremony in general and on E Groups in particular. The conscious attempt is to situate these architectural complexes in time and space to communicate their meaning and significance better. This introduction provides a background to E Group investigations and introduces readers to their distribution and significance. First, a section on the historiography of the study of Group E–type architecture is presented, following its initial identification at Uaxactún (Blom 1924:218) and ending with current information on E Group research across the Lowland Maya region. Next, reasons are posited for the significance of these architectural complexes and for their function and meaning within Maya societies. This meaning may have changed over time (a subject treated in greater detail in the chapters that follow).

As the first shared form of Maya public architecture, E Groups must have been important. The centrality of ritual and symbolism in the organization of ancient Maya space is reflected in modern Maya society as well. The Tzotzil Maya speakers of Zinacantán see the small mound in their ceremonial center as the navel of the world or earth, mishik or mixik’ balamil (Hanks 1990; Vogt 1976:7, 13, 33; Tate 1992:26; Zaro and Lohse 2005:93). To a large extent, the earliest E Groups must have represented a similar concept to the ancient Maya who constructed them.
During the nearly one hundred years of scholarship preceding this book, many changes in approaches to the archaeology of the region have taken place. For example, settlement pattern archaeology has given us a wealth of cartography and mapping data as well as detailed information about how the Maya distributed themselves over the landscape (Chase et al. 2014a, 2014b). Yet, ironically, these efforts to document the hinterland have brought us back to a consideration of the public architecture found in Maya centers. We now realize that ancient Maya centers, once described as “vacant” by J. Eric S. Thompson (1954) and others like Gordon Willey (1956) before the 1960s (and reinforced by William Bullard’s [1960] original settlement pattern interpretations), were far more complex in their internal composition and variable in terms of their sizes. We also recognize that these centers have undergone developmental changes over time. The majority of larger centers in the Southern Maya Lowlands share a profusion of public spaces that conform to an E Group layout. When tested, this architectural plan is always the earliest public architecture at any given Maya site, in some cases going back to almost 1000 BCE (Inomata et al. 2013, 2015).

This volume has an explicit focus on public architecture, the kind that is usually found in the center of Maya sites. It also urges further research within such venues to increase our knowledge of early Maya civilization. In some ways, this brings the Maya field full circle, for in the 1970s there was a backlash against an exclusive focus on monumental architecture by “new archaeologists,” like Kent Flannery (2009:16–24), in favor of household archaeology. With continued work, however, we have realized the importance of returning to the excavation of larger central architecture for a better contextualization of Maya residential groups. While archaeologists have documented the importance of the broader populace in terms of agricultural labor and community infrastructure, further excavation data from public architecture are necessary for a more balanced treatment of ancient Maya societal structure and its development.

When considering differences between those people who exerted power and control over others and those who followed or sustained them, it is logical to think about the social processes that led to Maya formal institutions, such as kingship and state-sponsored religion. What cultural adaptations made it possible to create an anthropogenic landscape filled with agriculture terraces, irrigate vast stretches of raised fields for maize agriculture, trade in semiprecious stones like jadeite (but also more quotidian items like obsidian and salt), and build stone edifices reaching high above the
jungle canopy? Mayanists now have an opportunity to speak with authority about exactly how, where, and why civilizations took hold and changed, in order to make fruitful comparisons with other Mesoamerican cultures like the Olmec, the Teotihuacanos, or the Zapotec. The underlying assumption made in this volume is that more than one solution for urban growth or collapse was available to Maya peoples. Furthermore, the study of E Group architecture is pivotal to investigating dynamic change and variability in sociocultural organization, in conjunction with other categories of data, such as those from written records, art, astronomical considerations, settlement patterns, artifacts, architecture, caches, and burials.

Many anthropologists and archaeologists recognize that early states arose in Mesoamerica (Fagan and Durrani 2013). Monte Albán, Oaxaca, home of the Zapotec, was the location of one of these primary or first-generation states (Redmond and Spencer 2012; Service 1975; Wright 1977:383). Elsa Redmond and Charles Spencer (2012:30) argue that the Zapotec state came to fruition somewhere between 300 and 100 BCE. Significant societal inequalities existed in the Oaxacan area by about 1200 BCE, however, and there is evidence between 630 and 560 BCE for the first stone monument with writing (Monument 3 from San José Mogote) in Mesoamerica (Spencer 2003:11186–11187, 2009:152). Once the Monte Albán state emerged, it is likely that it was engaged with other complex societies elsewhere in Mesoamerica.

When states appeared, they would have done so in a milieu that included other peer development. Thus, before the Christian era, it is likely that contemporaneous states were operating not only in Oaxaca but also elsewhere in Mesoamerica (Chase et al. 2009), such as in the Veracruz/Tabasco Lowlands (Clark 2007; Cyphers 1997), in central Mexico (Teotihuacán, presumably by 100 BCE [Nichols 2015]), and in the Maya area (El Mirador, possibly by 300 BCE [Dahlin 1984; Hansen 2001]). Social complexity and development are difficult to define in the archaeological record, and this volume has the potential to contribute important new interpretations to how this was accomplished in the past. Archaeologists have begun to move in new directions on the topic of social complexity to offer a richer appreciation for variable societal groups within or beside complex political groups. Through focusing on E Groups, it is possible to incorporate the nuanced views that agency and other theoretical approaches offer on activities that ran counter to normative trends (McGuire 1983; Paukatat 2007; Yoffee 2005).

A significant goal of this volume is directly to address where and when complex societies emerged in the Maya region, what form they took, their
tempo and mode, and how they changed and developed or devolved, while keeping in mind that increased political complexity was not inevitable or necessary. Groups resisting trends existed beside people embracing popular, enforced, or coerced solutions (Inomata et al. 2015). The ancient Maya exhibited great variability, both environmental and social (Chase et al. 2014c). Yet there was cultural standardization centered on the E Group.

As the earliest recognized form of public architecture in the Maya area, E Groups had to have been central to the social and political transformations that took place.

The ancient Maya were clearly interested in both history and place. While most hieroglyphic texts generally postdate the earliest E Groups, E Groups are the locus for the erection of the earliest stelae known at Uaxactún (Proskouriakoff 1950; Ricketson and Ricketson 1937) and the only one known at Cenote (Chase 1983). The Maya were firm believers in deep mythic time, as is evident in the inscriptions of both Palenque (Lounsbury 1980) and Naranjo (Grube and Schele 1993). Their fascination with time is also presumably conjoined with their rituals, which would have included the original construction and rebuilding of E Groups (Chase and Chase 2013). Because of the lack of a historical record associated with these early constructions, it remains for archaeologists to illuminate the meaning and importance of this architecture relative to Maya ritual, power, and social integration. Understanding the role that E Group architecture played in ancient Maya society is necessary to frame their path(s) to complexity and their later evolution.

**Historiography of E Group Research**

1924–1954

Credit for the discovery of the first astronomical observatory among the ancient Maya belongs to Frans Blom (1924, 1926), who was mapping Uaxactún’s Group E when he realized that the architectural alignments matched the sun’s solstice and equinox points. The Ricketsons’ (Ricketson 1928; Ricketson and Ricketson 1937) work excavating the Uaxactún Group E prototype soon followed (Figure 1.2). Karl Ruppert (1977; Ruppert and Dennison 1943) identified the thirteen other complexes that exhibited the same plan, as well as six others that varied somewhat. Prior to this, Thompson unknowingly had conducted excavations in two E Groups at Hatzcap Ceel
Figure 1.2. Plan of the latest (Early Classic) version of Uaxactún Group E, the prototype for all E Group analysis, showing what Oliver Ricketson and Edith Ricketson (1937:107) referred to as "astronomically important elements."


Twenty-five architectural groups resembling Uaxactún's Group E were identified between 1924 and 1954 at twenty-two sites. Most were within a 110 km radius of Uaxactún. Of these known E Groups, four had been excavated (16 percent of the known E Groups at that time). The E Groups
that had been excavated prior to 1954 occurred at the sites of Hatzcap Ceel (Belize), Cahal Pichik (Belize), Uaxactún (Guatemala), and San José (Belize) (Aveni and Hartung 1988, 1989; Aveni et al. 2003; Chase 1983:90–154, 1985; Chase and Chase 1995; Ricketson 1927, 1928, Ricketson and Ricketson 1937:107; Ruppert 1934:94, 1977:223, 225, 226, 227, 229, 231; Ruppert and Denison 1943:5–6, 13–23, Plate 61; Smith 1950; Thompson 1931:240, 250, 1939:9). Additional site maps illustrating E Groups (at Acanceh [Mexico], Balakbal [Mexico], and Xunantunich [Belize]) were also presented in a variety of other sources, some of which predate the formal definition of this architectural assemblage (Marquina 1951; Maudslay 1889–1902; Morley 1933, 1937–1938:Plates 218, 191a; Seler 1915; Tozzer 1913).

1955–1984

Between 1955 and 1984, archaeologists reported E Groups at ten additional sites: Baking Pot (Belize), Caracol (Belize), Ceibal (Guatemala, also spelled Seibal), Cenote (Guatemala), Dzibilchaltún (Mexico), Dzibilnocac (Mexico), El Mirador (Guatemala), Lamanai (Belize), Paxcamán (Guatemala), and Tayasal (Guatemala). Four more E Groups had been excavated: Ceibal in 1970, Cenote in 1971, Lamanai in 1981, and Dzibilchaltún in 1983, making the excavation sample equal to 24 percent of the thirty-three known examples (Andrews 1980:15; Chase 1983; Willey 1970). Not included in this discussion is the early excavation of a triadic shrine at Baking Pot (Bulldard and Bullard 1965). Publications that included information relevant to E Groups, either mapped or published, included Robert Carr and James Hazard’s (1961:11, 19) Great Plaza Quadrangle (1959) map for Tikal, where the Lost World Complex is recorded; Anthony Aveni (1978) on Uaxactún; Clemency Coggins (1983) and Edward B. Kurjack (1979; Kurjack et al. 1979) on Dzibilchaltún; David M. Pendergast (1981) on Lamanai; and Bruce Dahlin (1984) on El Mirador. Arlen Chase (1983) presented a detailed record of the Cenote E Group excavations and also contextualized this E Group through reanalyzing the data presented in Ruppert’s (1977) earlier publication. Chase (1983, 1985; Chase and Chase 1995) defined two specific kinds of E Groups: the Cenote Style E Group (Figure 1.3), an early variant of Preclassic period (1000 BCE–250 CE) date, characterized by a long eastern platform usually supporting a much larger central structure; and the Uaxactún Style E Group, a later architectural variant of Early Classic period (250–600 CE) date, characterized by a shorter eastern platform supporting three structures. Marvin Cohodas (1980) discussed the relationship of E Groups to celebrating agricultural cycles, an idea that was developed
Figure 1.3. Isometric reconstruction of the Cenote E Group (after Chase and Chase 2012:258).
further by James Aimers (1993:171–179), as well as Travis Stanton and David Freidel (2003), who referred to E Groups as “maize theaters.” The cosmological landscape of E Groups discussed by Cohodas (1980) has also been viewed as related to origin places for the sun and moon (Chinchilla Mazariegos et al. 2015).

1985–2016

With the explosion in fieldwork that has been carried out in the Maya area between 1985 and 2016, more than 142 additional E Groups have been documented during this time. Many of these E Groups occurred in the southeast Petén and were documented by one project (Laporte 2001:141; Escobedo 2008; see Chapter 2 in this volume). Given the archaeology accomplished to date, at least 33 E Groups have seen some excavation, roughly 20 percent of the known examples (Figures 1.4, 1.5). Calakmul’s E Group was excavated and reconstructed in 1994 (Carrasco 1999; Carrasco et al. 1995; Dowd et al. 1995:6; Dowd and Aveni 1998). Other reported E Group assemblages excavated from 1985 through 2014 include Cahal Pech (Belize; Awe 2013), Caracol (Belize; Chase and Chase 1995, 2006), Chan (Belize; Robin et al. 2012), Cival (Guatemala; n = 2; Estrada-Belli 2002, 2003a, 2003b), Nakbé (Guatemala; Hansen 2000), Pacbitún (Belize; Micheletti 2016), and Ceibal (Guatemala; Inomata et al. 2013). Partial excavations of E Groups also have taken place at Nadzca’an (Mexico) in 1994–1995, as well as at Yaxhá (Guatemala; n = 2) and Xunantunich (Belize). The E Group at Dzibilchaltún has also been described (Coggins and Drucker 1988). Tikal’s E Group was initially excavated in 1987 (Laporte and Fialko 1987, 1990). Not included in this discussion are two triadic shrines investigated at Cahal Pech (Awe 2013) and Pacbitún (Healy 1990).

Figure 1.4. Distribution of E Group–type complexes (cartography by Marc Wolf). See Chapter 2 for information on the heavy concentration of E Groups in the southeast Petén.


Juan Pedro Laporte (2001:141) mapped a sample of 177 sites from southeast Petén and concluded that 85 percent or 150 of these had Group E complexes present. An additional 13 E Groups occupy the area around the Machaquilá, Cansís, and Pusilhá rivers, bringing his total to 163 known examples from this zone (which may overlap somewhat with the examples that others have mentioned in their publications). Laporte (2001:142) noted that three or more sites had two Group E–type complexes each: Rosario 1, La Unión 1, and Santa Ana–Zamir. While most E Groups occupy the central part of the site \( (n = 153) \), of the sample that do not \( (n = 10) \), all are found

in the periphery of a given site (and 5 of those already have an E Group occupying the site center). Laporte (2001:142) mentioned that many of the sites containing peripheral E Groups were in a relatively constricted zone north of the Salsipuedes River. The 5 sites without central E Groups are El Chilonché, La Amapola, Los Lagartos, El Chal, and Calzada Mopán.

Laporte (2001:142) observed that, besides being centrally located, most E Groups provided the largest open plaza space at a given site, with dimensions ranging from 500 to 5,000 m²; he further estimated that about 75 examples (about 46 percent) had plazas smaller than 1,000 m² and that another 77 (about 47 percent) had plazas between 1,000 to 3,000 m². Laporte (2001:143) suggested that a site’s location either in hillier regions or in flatter
riverine areas affected the plaza size allotted to the E Groups. Another 7 sites (4 percent) contained E Groups with plazas in excess of 3,000 m²; at least 3 of these sites were more properly parts of larger sites. The remaining 3 percent of his sample lacked size estimates. In the Guatemalan Highlands, sites such as Takalik Abaj also have been noted to have Group E architecture (Estrada-Belli 2012a, 2012b:3; Popenoe de Hatch 2002). Pacific Coast examples have also been noted.

Alignment patterns from 40 E Groups for which good maps were available were analyzed in 2003 (Aveni et al. 2003:162, Table 1). As a result of this analysis, the authors asserted that E Group–type complexes functioned as non-Western observatories and further documented a shift from solstice/equinox to zenith passage dating to within the late part of the Early Classic period or about CE 350–550, attributing the shift to influence from Teotihuacán (Aveni et al. 2003:171). Controversy over the reasons why orientations of other recognized examples of E Group–type structures do not line up with the cardinal directions and/or solstice or equinox positions on the horizon were addressed (Aveni et al. 2003). The authors pointed out that at some sites other periods in the calendar were commemorated, such as 20-day Winals (Maya months) anchored to the zenith and nadir passages of the sun. The precise mode of use changed through time to replace or augment solar solstice/equinox dates with zenith passage dates, meaning that E Group design was tailored to individual site contexts. Regardless, some authors have continued to promote nonastronomical ritual functions for E Groups, a debate that is still evident in the following chapters (Aimers and Rice 2006:82, 86). Rather than being an either/or proposition, both functions are possible simultaneously, and the excavated examples warrant careful study.

Grant Aylesworth (2004:Table 1, 2015) broadened the functional definition of E Group complexes and discussed 50 examples. James Aimers and Prudence Rice (2006: Table 1, 81) reviewed E Group–type complexes and listed 64 examples. Thomas Guderjan (2006:97–103) suggested that there were about 100 examples, citing Gary Savoie (2004), but also discussed 4 “pseudo-E-groups” that lacked a western and a central eastern structure at the Belize sites of Blue Creek, Chan Chich, San José, and Quam Hill. Another possible analog may be at Pusilhá (Structures IV, V, and VII). Recent publications also cover Yaxhá and other sites, like El Mirador (Hansen 1991b; Šprajc et al. 2009).
Current Research

The current volume, resulting from two working sessions at the Santa Fe Institute in August 2012 and August 2013, has produced several insights into the interpretation of E Groups. The earliest known E Groups start by clearing the landscape to bedrock; the bedrock then was modified to produce building-like features that were later encased within rebuilt E Group construction fills (Chase 1983; Estrada-Belli 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2006, 2011, 2012a:4, 2012b; Robin et al. 2012:Figure 6.3). This focus on bedrock modification is found at other important religious sites throughout the ancient Americas, such as the later Aztec rock sanctuary at Malinalco, Mexico (Jaramillo and Nieto 1998) and the later Inca sites of Quillarumiyoc (Anta Province, Peru) and Saywite (Apurímac Province, Peru) (Aveni 2008). The scraping and shaping of bedrock is part of a long tradition of earth, mountain, or cave (and water) worship in Central and South America (Broda 2015:223–226; Dowd 2015:214).

A second observation was that E Group architecture varied in size and location, possibly cross-cutting several forms of community organization. One E Group variant, a triadic shrine like that found at Chan, Belize (Robin et al. 2012), occurs in a small complex of public architecture that was presumably associated with a single family. Others, like those found at Uaxactún and Calakmul, were parts of larger planned groupings of public architecture that would have served sizable populations; however, later occupation in the immediate region of these plazas precludes fully understanding the size and density of the original communities.

Further insights were also gained about the relationships between E Group locations and trade routes. E Groups tend to be concentrated along trade routes in both the Southern Lowlands (see Chapter 2 in this volume) and the Northern Lowlands (see Chapter 14 this volume). New E Groups continue to be located by researchers (Chase et al. 2014b). Recent excavation of the earliest-known E Group in the Southern Lowlands at Ceibal has raised questions about general Mesoamerican connections in the Middle Preclassic period (1000–350 BCE) (Inomata et al. 2013), calling for more investigation of Middle Preclassic E Groups. Yet our understanding of E Groups has been augmented by the ongoing excavation and analysis carried out at a large number of sites covered within this volume: Calakmul, Mexico (Dowd); Caracol, Belize (Chase and Chase); Ceibal, Guatemala (Inomata and Sabloff); Chan, Belize (Robin); Cival, Guatemala (Estrada-Belli); El Palmar, Guatemala (Doyle); San Bartolo, Guatemala (Saturno, Beltrán, and...
Rossi); Tikal, Guatemala (Doyle); Xunantunich, Belize (Brown); Yaxnocah, Mexico (Reese-Taylor); and Yaxuná, Mexico (Stanton and Freidel). Finally, E Group architectural complexes can be situated in terms of the broader Maya cosmos through framing them with relevant information pertaining to the astronomical, calendrical, ritual, and sociopolitical traditions underlying their construction (Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6 in this volume; see also Broda 1989; Carlson 1981; Dowd and Milbrath 2015; and Freidel 1986, 2008).

**Distribution and Significance of E Group Complexes**

The Maya archaeological record provides important information about how E Groups helped to shape societal development. While the original inspiration for E Groups will remain a matter of debate, whether indigenous or borrowed (Clark and Hansen 2001), early versions of these architectural complexes had surely appeared in the Southern Maya Lowlands by 1000 BCE in the Middle Preclassic period (Inomata et al. 2013). By the early part of the Late Preclassic period (400 BCE–225 CE), these layouts were being used to establish a site as a formal Maya place. This can be inferred from the number, spacing, and dating of these groups within the Petén of Guatemala, west-central Belize, and the southern part of the Yucatán Peninsula of Mexico. The idea that these units would have spread along trade routes presumably accounts for their distribution both in the southeastern Petén and in the Yucatán Peninsula.

Time was an important conceptual element for the ancient Maya. It is likely that E Groups were built at auspicious points within the Maya calendar, possibly in concert with events and ceremonies relating to larger temporal cycles that were partitions of the Bak’tun (400-year period). Based on the archaeology and radiocarbon dates, one version of the E Group in the site epicenter at Caracol, Belize, was constructed at the beginning of Bak’tun 8 in 41 CE (Chase and Chase 2006). Given the standardization of the architectural form, it is likely that temporal principles were also incorporated into construction practices elsewhere. Using Caracol as a guide, early special deposits associated with Late Preclassic E Groups appear to have been involved in using elaborate caches to “center” the central eastern E Group structure relative to the Maya cosmos (Chase 1988; Chase and Chase 1998; Freidel et al. 1993).

Several researchers in this book have discovered important expressions of the material symbol-systems deployed by ancient Maya to express what
they were doing with early E Groups. Takeshi Inomata and his colleagues (2013) have found the earliest celt caches in the Maya Lowlands defining the sun path at the Ceibal E Group. These caches of precious and labor-intensive greenstone axes anticipate the formally arranged deposits at La Venta and resonate with earlier formal celt caches at Laguna Manatee, both in the Olmec Gulf Coast heartland. David Freidel and F. Kent Reilly (2010) have suggested that such arrangements may reference divination rituals that even today use spatially patterned material tokens among Maya daykeepers. Francisco Estrada-Belli’s (2006) project at Cival discovered a remarkably rich later Middle Preclassic cache associated with the E Group there. That cache included the cruciform layout of fine greenstone celts over a bed of greenstone pebbles (Estrada-Belli 2006). Again, as Estrada-Belli suggests in his chapter, the pebbles might represent casting and divining tokens, an artifact category that might prove pervasive in Mesoamerica if we start looking for it (Freidel and Rich 2015). Small stone or shell tokens in conjunction with stick-shaped artifacts were likely used for the calculation of calendar time, especially given the bar and dot positional numeration of Mesoamerica. David Stuart (personal communication, September 16, 2014) reiterates his view that the Maya only used bar and dot numeration for calendar dates and used names for numbers applied to other things like bags of cacao beans. Whether or not the categorical dissociation of bar and dot notation from big number calculation of things other than days proves to be the case, it seems quite possible that the laying out of formal bar and dot inscriptions on public monuments was a way of declaring that the given historical date was also a divination performance anchoring the future to the past on that occasion. Thus, caches associated with Middle Preclassic E Groups might presage such practice.

Public monumental architecture and plazas were places for such ceremony along with more prosaic activities. For all of the contributors to this book who deal with Preclassic material symbols, performance is a thematically central concern. Performance, depicted in the spectacular Pinturas building murals at San Bartolo or implied as in the architecture of the Pinturas Complex (as discussed by Saturno, Beltrán, and Rossi in Chapter 10) or Structure 5C at Cerros, naturally segues to agency: how did the E Group phenomenon bear on the advent and development of rulership? The association of time reckoning with rulership comes as naturally as breathing to Maya archaeologists, and this book is in part a quest for the source of this link. We are some way from consensus on how performance, as manifest in symbols, declared a particular institutional expression of kingship and the
relation of kings to gods. Most of the participants in this book accept divine kingship as an institutional reality in the Preclassic Maya world. Some of our colleagues now think that the Maya largely innovated this institution in their own terms, although the iconography of the Late Preclassic Maya Maize God Prototype King is clearly Olmec in stylistic inspiration, as documented at San Bartolo, Cival, Cerros, and elsewhere.

Was Maya kingship always dynastic and based upon principles of primogeniture or some variant of this kin-based method? Simon Martin (2005) is beginning to question this assumption, as have others (Chase et al. 2009; Freidel 2018). In the Preclassic Maya record, there are only a few kings or carved stone monuments depicting kings. While we anchor our premises regarding social development into those that we have, none are associated with genealogical statements such as become common in the Southern Maya Lowlands in the Classic period (250–950 CE). So it is possible that kingship itself evolved significantly in the Late Preclassic–Early Classic transition or the Terminal or Protoclassic period at about 0–250 CE in conjunction with E Groups, something potentially reflected in the archaeological record associated with these complexes (Chase and Chase 1995).

With the advent of the Early Classic period, the centering principles were both altered and elaborated. The E Groups that have been excavated demonstrate some of this variability. All three Early Classic buildings situated upon the eastern platform of Uaxactún’s E Group appear to have been centered with caches (Ricketson and Ricketson 1937). As human skull caches were used in this centering, it possibly implies a more individualistic aspect than had previously been seen in the associated rituals. Yet the focus on “three” is found elsewhere in Maya art and iconography and may indicate that each eastern building was associated with one of a given site’s three founders (Chase and Chase 2012) or with the three items held in the bowl of the Quadripartite Badge (Robertson 1974). Estrada-Belli (2011) discovered three massive postholes, likely the placement of tall posts, organized as a triangle around a Preclassic stela set in front of the eastern range of the E Group at Cival.

Like the Uaxactún E Group, the Cenote E Group was also associated with early Maya monuments, and a skull cache and an elaborate interment were included within the last phase of the central building on the eastern platform in the early part of the Early Classic period (Chase 1983). At Tikal, the E Group goes back to the Middle Preclassic period, but in the early part of the Early Classic period elaborate burials were included in the eastern
buildings (Laporte and Fialko 1995). At Caracol, early carved monuments and a late Early Classic tomb were placed in front of the eastern platform; another late Early Classic tomb was included in one of the eastern structures. The association both of early stone monuments and of elaborate early burials in E Groups is suggestive of the conflation of these architectural complexes with dynastic founding and development. Thus, it is likely that E Groups were important places for the establishment of ruling elites at any given site. Even though the buildings in many E Groups were largely left untouched once the dynasties had been established, in an E Group variant found in west-central Belize the three eastern buildings continued to be stocked with important interments throughout the Late Classic period (Awe 2013).

Conclusion

Ancient architectural plans like E Groups are an important form of data that permit an exploration of cultural similarities and differences as well as external connections. When such plans can be joined with their archaeological records, they offer a rich base for interpreting ancient ritual. As the earliest form of public architecture in the Maya area, E Groups facilitate the identification of a shared Maya cultural base; the archaeology of these units provides a window to their ancient ritual world. Recognizing how E Groups both were used and were transformed over a lengthy period permits insight into the changes that occurred in ancient Maya society. E Group plazas are still recognizable at most ancient sites (many largely unchanged in form for nearly two thousand years), which suggests that these complexes must be viewed as cultural hallmarks that held deep evocative meaning to the people who used them and that they can be used to frame our understanding of the ancient Maya.

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