
Epilogue

E Groups and Their Significance to the Ancient Maya

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E Groups are emerging as the earliest replicated public architecture in the Maya Lowlands. “Replicated” refers to the repetitive construction of a similar architectural form across parts of the Maya Lowlands. As earlier chapters indicate, there is no longer any doubt that E Groups were built (and rebuilt) as early at 1000 BCE (particularly at Ceibal) and that they continued to be built through the Early Classic period.

Contributors to this book point out, however, that the long duration of E Group construction and use can be contrasted with significant change and elaboration in E Group complexes.

Regardless of this dynamism, there remains consensus that E Groups were linked to ground and horizon-based astronomy.

Although E Groups were invented in the Isthmian area to the west, their centrality in the Maya region—initially for community integration and place-making and later for performative activities linked to dynastic concerns and the long count—hints at their significance to understanding *both* the initial formation and subsequent development of Maya civilization. The rapid expansion during the Preclassic period of this highly patterned architectural form—complete with elaborative ground preparation, caching practices, and artifacts indicative of ritual activities—is unique within Maya history. The many archaeological contexts of Preclassic E Groups reviewed in the preceding chapters indicate that the expression, elaboration, and replication of this architectural form in the Maya Lowlands became thoroughly indigenous and, over time, entangled with an emerging ethos of rulership.

As with any highly patterned manifestation of what appear to have been deeply seated concepts girding this architectural form, contributors to this

volume are compelled to attend to the definitional elasticity of E Groups and criteria for inclusion.

On this front, there is broad consensus about the basic form of E Groups. True E Groups contain both a western pyramid and an opposing long eastern structure. Architectural assemblages lacking a visible western pyramid are not considered to be E Groups unless excavation shows that a western structure did in fact exist at one point.

Development of E groups over time also is evident in low-lying Cenote-style structure assemblages that predate the initially identified Uaxactún forms. This earlier form exhibits variation in the length and superstructural composition of the eastern building. Middle and Late Preclassic period Cenote-style eastern platforms tend to be longer, measuring from 90 to 172 m, contain a larger central superstructure, and may or may not be flanked by smaller buildings. In contrast, the eastern structure of Early Classic E Groups tend to be shorter, measuring around 70 m in length (see Chase 1983, 1985).

The most famous E Group—that of Uaxactún—can be considered an example of a derived form. From the initial discovery and description of E Groups based on work at Group E at the site of Uaxactún in Guatemala (Ricketson and Ricketson 1937), archaeologists and archaeoastronomers have suggested that this architectural assemblage was constructed in order to permit detailed observations of the sky and the movement of the sun, moon, and stars. This explanation fit very well with mid-twentieth-century ideas about Classic Maya preoccupations with astronomy and calendrical reckoning.

Although the Uaxactún E Group indeed does conform to celestial alignments, testing of E Group–like architectural complexes at other sites and from earlier periods failed to confirm that all E Group complexes were aligned for celestial reckoning (Aveni and Hartung 1989). The more general association of E Groups with tracking the passage of the sun has passed the test of time, however, and can be inferred from symbolic associations and temporality of construction and modification efforts. Furthermore, while the western pyramid size and function varied, the eastern structure, with its unvarying north–south alignment, always formed a horizon-based solar structure. As a structure complex from which changes in the movement of the sun could be detected as well as nocturnal patterns of lunar and stellar progression, E Groups must have been linked with celebratory ideas of renewal. As some volume contributors discuss, Preclassic E Groups

occasionally yield associated ceramic assemblages that feature elaborate surface decoration, possibly indicative of communal ritual activities.

Classic period caches and stone monuments associated with E Group plazas and buildings mark the particular way in which this architectural form was indigenized within the Maya Lowlands. An architectural form that had worked to integrate fluid and perhaps not fully sedentary communities during the early centuries of the Preclassic period was harnessed to dynastic concerns with centrality and permanence during the Classic period. Not only were dated monuments focused on K'atun-ending cycles found within E Group plazas, as is the case with the Group E plaza at Uaxactún, but excavations at sites such as Caracol confirm that construction and renovation episodes were undertaken in association with larger temporal cycles such as Bak'tuns. Despite change in the manner in which these timescapes were deployed, caches located in front of and within E Group constructions confirm the highly charged cosmological function of these spaces, regardless of when they were constructed. Whether viewing the placement or content of ritual deposits, it is apparent that locations of E Groups continued to emphasize directionality and layering, effectively materializing Maya views of the world and time.

The location of ritual deposits associated with E Groups varied tremendously over the course of Maya history. Early on, a key ritual locus occurred in the open plaza space in front of the eastern structure (as at Ceibal); but later ritual deposits are found within the structures themselves (as at Uaxactún and Caracol). Excavations of Preclassic E Groups at Cenote and Xunantunich indicate clearly that founding these public structures required scraping off the black soil and exposing the white limestone bedrock. The base of these early constructions directly contacts bedrock, which conjures notions of purification or the conceptual necessity of firmly grounding a structure that was to be used for horizon-based astronomy.

Naturally, the lion's share of attention has been paid to the astronomical and cosmological function of E Groups. Often overlooked is the association between these architectural assemblages and water and the underworld. Reservoirs frequently were located nearby; and, in some cases, mechanisms that encouraged water pooling may have been created in place of formal reservoirs. Water symbolism is evident in cached objects that include the remains or likenesses of water creatures (such as shells, coral, or turtles). When combined with evidence for water pooling, turtle representations and turtle metaphors suggest the liminality of E Group structures that were

simultaneously located in the current world and rooted in the underworld. At Caracol, Classic period tombs built at the base of the eastern E Group structure fill with water on a seasonal basis, creating a place where human remains and offerings are literally placed within the underworld. When this use is combined with their astronomical functions, it is apparent that these complexes operated on several registers and incorporated the totality of existence.

Thus, E groups were imbued with both cosmological and temporal significance; however, specific aspects of their focus and function changed over time. Spreading quickly over a broad swath of the southern Maya Lowlands in tandem with or slightly preceding the first signs of settled farming communities, early E Groups can be understood as an experiment engaged in by self-organizing communities settling novel terrain. The efficacy of these constructions to knit together kin groups and smaller communities is indicated by their longevity. Contributors to this volume take pains to note that the distribution and spread of E Groups conform to coeval systems of communication and trade, a further argument for the integrative capacity of E Groups.

While initially serving to focus and establish place, E Groups spread across the Lowlands and can be found in small communities in relatively close proximity to each other. But as time went on, E Groups became concentrated in politically dominant places, suggesting the shift in function from community integration to a focus on broader political strategies of power consolidation. Change in E Group distribution can be interpreted as proxy evidence of enlarged polities over time. In the Caracol polity, for instance, only the epicentral A Plaza E Group continued to be the locus of building and ritual efforts during the entirety of the Classic period.

During the Preclassic, the distribution of E groups in the southeast Petén and Belize is more dense than elsewhere in the Maya Lowlands. This distribution provides a clue to systems of communication and trade as well as to changes in the political landscape. In the southeast Petén, for instance, E Groups initially can be found at sites of varying sizes that were located within 3 to 5 km of each other along a southern trade route that connected the Pasión River to the Caribbean Sea via the Belize River. Elsewhere in the Maya Lowlands, however, distances between E Group sites are much greater. Thus, the rapid spread in construction of E Groups did not take place in a vacuum of settlers preoccupied with marking time but aligned with emerging routes of trade and communication that linked the Petén

with Belize. Mechanisms for replication conform to the imitation and emulation behaviors commonly expected among small peer polities (Renfrew 1986).

Yet, later in time, construction and renovation of E Groups took place predominantly in regional capitals. Established as physical expressions of Maya temporality and cosmology, E Groups continued to provide a structuring metaphor of place-making and renewal. But the ritual activities performed at Classic period E Groups changed dramatically; and, in some cases, the places that marked time also housed the corporeal remains of ancestors. In a remarkable way, E Groups changed radically while retaining the same highly patterned form—a classic characteristic of resilience. As this volume shows, a close examination of the many and varied archaeological contexts in which these architectural chameleons occur provides a rich window into the ancient Maya past.

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