

## Contextualizing the Archaeology of Pacbitun, Belize: An Epilogue

*Arlen F. Chase*

Pacbitun today is located ‘off the beaten track,’ tucked into a remote locale abutting the foothills of the Maya Mountains at a distance from major modern population centres. But this site was apparently not isolated in antiquity. The archaeological record of Pacbitun exhibits extensive long-distance trade connections during both the Middle to Late Preclassic eras and, again, during the Terminal Classic period. It was also locally connected to neighbouring sites in Belize throughout its archaeological history. While Pacbitun was the most prominent settlement in its immediate proximity, probably beholden to other polities during most of its history, the real question is how and why this remotely-located site was so interconnected to the rest of the Maya world? We don’t talk much about Maya globalisation, but the archaeological data from Pacbitun make it clear that the centre was never removed from the mainstream of Maya society and, indeed, at some points in its history was exceedingly connected with the rest of the Maya world.

Particularly during the Preclassic period, the site provides an early expression of complex Maya architecture, presumably both in private and public contexts. The earliest architectural complexes at the site date to the Middle Preclassic period (900-300 BC) and consist of what appear to be the outlines of large construction platforms, often only one course high, separated by long narrow alleyways (e.g., see chapter three, this volume; Powis *et al.* 2017). The areal exposures of these architectural features at Pacbitun are fairly unique. Given that similar areal excavations to expose early architecture are not frequently undertaken to the same degree at other Maya sites, it is not clear whether these features exist in a similar form elsewhere. Whatever the case, the earliest Pacbitun platforms, while low-lying, are combined with walkways, suggestive of complex neighbourhood planning. The conjoined platforms and alleyways are a development that does not appear to have survived into later eras. The layout of these early platforms and walkways, albeit at a smaller scale, echoes other Middle Preclassic settlement plans that disappear, such as the early gridded cities of the Maya that also did not survive into the Late Preclassic era (300 BC –AD 250; e.g., A. Chase and D. Chase 2019a). While only a small sample of Middle Preclassic Pacbitun settlement has been excavated, in combination with the more monumental architecture associated with Pacbitun’s Plaza A, it is possible that further excavation may reveal a gridded plan—such as that found at Nix’tun Chich’ in the Peten of Guatemala (Pugh 2019; Pugh and Rice 2017) and associated with other sites both in the Peten (Pugh *et*

*al.* 2019) and in the Tabasco region of Mexico (Inomata *et al.* 2021)—that has been overlain by Late Classic terraforming and construction.

Pacbitun also evinces a precocious development of public architecture co-incident with the development of early E Groups at sites elsewhere in the southern Maya lowlands (Freidel *et al.* 2017). The one structure that has been fully defined on this early level is an impressive northern platform that is some 2 m in height and measures 32.5 m east-west by 20.4 m north-south; it dates to between 600-400 BC and is associated with the initial plaza floor above bedrock within Pacbitun Plaza A (see chapter three, this volume). The use of 3D imagery to show what this building (and others at Pacbitun) looks like is an innovative use of this technology in the Maya area (see chapter seven, this volume). The buried construction in Plaza A is clearly a public building, but what it articulates with is not clear. While we focus on the western pyramid and the long eastern platforms of E Groups (e.g., A. Chase and D. Chase 2017), sometimes these groups are associated with both northern and southern platforms, as can be seen in the early excavations of Group E at Uaxactun, where a northern platform was established at the beginning of that complex’s history conjoined with a slightly later southern platform surmounted by a triadic complex that defined the northern and southern ends of the better understood eastern and western constructions forming Uaxactun’s E Group (Ricketson and Ricketson 1937); similar constructions associated with E Groups have also been recorded at a series of sites in the central part of the Yucatan Peninsula by Ruppert and Dennison (1943; see also Hansen 1992). Therefore, it is imperative that the relationship of this early northern platform to any constructions underlying the eastern and western buildings in Pacbitun Plaza A be determined in future work.

In its present form, Pacbitun Plaza A constitutes an eastern triadic complex, which served as both an ancestral shrine and a ritual locus. Eastern triadic complexes are the Belize Valley variants of E Group complexes (Awe *et al.* 2017; A. Chase *et al.* 2014; Micheletti 2016; see also chapter 5, this volume). This is indicated both by the fact that there is no common platform for the three eastern buildings and by the extensive sequence of burials within the eastern constructions that span the entire Classic period, including the Late Classic period (see chapter two, this volume; Healy 1990a; Healy *et al.* 2004), something not found in traditional E Groups (Chase and Chase 1995; Laporte and Fialko 1995) but that is in evidence in the well-excavated

eastern buildings in the eastern triadic complexes associated with the main plazas at Chan (Robin 2017) and Cahal Pech (Awe 2013). While originally established as important public buildings associated with solar observation by independent communities, the function of the eastern triadic complexes of the Belize Valley changed over time; as these smaller centres were incorporated into larger political units and communities lost some of their more overarching ritual activities, these eastern triadic complexes became venues for the placement of important local dead.

Besides the construction of monumental architecture during the Preclassic period at Pacbitun, the site was engaged in the production of beads made from marine shell as well as the procurement of massive amounts of *jute*, ostensibly for culinary purposes (see chapter four, this volume; Healy *et al.* 1990). These marine beads and debitage occur in the fills of Pacbitun's early platforms and on the surface floors of these structures, indicative of both use and manufacturing debris; the debris is also associated with chert micro-drills that are reflective of the manufacturing process (Healy *et al.* 2014; Hohmann 2014). The amount of marine shell associated with the early platforms of Pacbitun is reflective of its inter-connectivity with the rest of the Maya world during the Middle and Late Preclassic periods and of the extensiveness of early trade in these items. This trade also included grouper and parrot fish from the Caribbean Sea (see chapter four, this volume), something also recorded for Caracol (Teeter and Chase 2004). Of even more interest is the incorporation of *jute* shells into the fills of early platforms. While *jute* can be a subsistence item (Healy *et al.* 1990), the inclusion of tens of thousands of these shells in the central fills of Pacbitun can also be interpreted as symbolically representing the underworld, in much the same way as the incorporation of massive amounts of greenstones in the fills of La Venta, Mexico (Drucker *et al.* 1955). Thus, the earliest construction fills at Pacbitun could possibly be interpreted as a conscious attempt to create a cosmological version of the Maya world where the massive amount of shell in the platform fills symbolically represented the lower level of the Maya world.

Late Classic period Pacbitun (AD 550 – 800) appears to be a production locale for slate, granite, musical instruments, and perhaps some kinds of crops as reflected in the proliferation of Late Classic agricultural terraces. Slate, presumably because of its black colour, was utilised in ancient Maya ritual. Healy and his colleagues (1995) have noted that at least 45 locations existed at Pacbitun that incorporated slate into the archaeological record. He noted a source for slate not far from the site. Larger pieces of slate were used for burial linings and capstones. Smaller pieces of slate formed the backs of hematite mirrors. Further south of Pacbitun, at Caracol, slate was used for tomb and burial capstones, for carved hieroglyphic monuments, for mirror backs, and for smaller objects like pendants and drills (associated with shell working); smaller chips of slate were also incorporated into many of

the site's ritual deposits. While Pacbitun did not provide slate to Caracol, it may well have provided it to other sites in the Belize Valley. Slate is noted as having been worked at Xunantunich (Braswell 2010) and it is likely that the material found there ultimately derived from Pacbitun. The evidence for granite production at Pacbitun was found in residential groups of Late Classic date where preforms for manos were recovered (see chapter fourteen, this volume). The mano preforms were found on the west side of the site even though sources of granite were located only to the east (see chapter fifteen, this volume). Another case of granite preform production, this time for metates, has been reported for the banks of the Macal River (now under water) east of Caracol (A. Chase *et al.* 2014:8680).

One of the unusual things about Pacbitun is the large number of musical instruments that have been recovered in burials at the centre. These were initially reported by Healy (1988; Healy *et al.* 2008) and newer finds are reported by Cheong (see chapter eight, this volume). All of these instruments date to the Late Classic period. Some of the inhabitants of Pacbitun must have been musicians and these instruments were likely utilised for rituals and highly prized. Their longevity is indicated by the wear and tear on some of these pottery items. Whether or not they were actually manufactured at Pacbitun is an open question, but the centre is certainly unusual in terms of the quantity of fine whistles, flutes, and ocarinas recovered in the course of archaeological research there. The twelve wind instruments recovered in Burial 2 (Pacbitun's eastern court) suggest a potential death ritual involving multiple musicians or, alternatively, the prized possessions of a musician. Because some of these instruments were older than others, it may be that the latter interpretation is correct. The number of musical instruments recovered in Pacbitun's Late Classic interments strongly suggests that there was a focus by the centre's inhabitants on the production of music. It is not so far-fetched to suppose that there were even traveling troupes of very experienced musicians from Pacbitun that went to other coterminous Belize Valley centres to actively participate in a variety of ceremonies.

One of the architectural features that initially drew Healy to Pacbitun was the site's agricultural terraces, features that he was involved in investigating throughout the Maya Mountain area (Healy *et al.* 1980; Healy *et al.* 1983). These are similar to others reported for Caracol (A. Chase and D. Chase 1996, 1998) and for the Belize Valley (e.g., Chan [Wyatt 2012] and the Xunantunich area [Neff 2010]). They are not as extensive at Pacbitun as they are at Caracol, but their presence indicates that crops were intensively produced in the area, either in support of the higher level of population around the centre during the Late Classic period or possibly to produce surplus food items that were exported either as trade items to other areas or as tribute to a higher political authority.

The site plan for Pacbitun shows that causeways were integral to the centre. However, the Late Classic causeways

at Pacbitun do not seem to have been for the movement of goods in an economic sense, like they were at Caracol (D. Chase and A. Chase 2014; A. Chase *et al.* 2015). Rather, they appear to have been used for ritual or social linkages (see chapter thirteen, this volume). In some ways they are variants of the ritual causeways of Tikal that link various pyramids to the site epicentre (A. Chase and D. Chase 2003). The southwest causeway is perhaps the most interesting, especially as it terminates at a cave located some 2.6 kms distant from the site centre. Investigation of this cave and other caves in the vicinity of Pacbitun has involved the use of digital technologies as well as tests on absorbed residues on recovered cave artefacts (see chapter ten, this volume). Analysis of materials from caves shows the use of pine for rituals (and probably ritual items), as well as the use of different woods in association with different rituals (see chapter eleven, this volume). The analyses of absorbed residues from Pacbitun are intriguing in terms of what they produced (see chapter twelve, this volume). The initial focus was on analysing bone tubes to determine if they had been used as enemas (an idea first promulgated during late 1960s drug culture and espoused by some Mesoamerican researchers, such as Furst and Coe 1977, and sometimes supported by looted [and possibly repainted] pottery materials [e.g., Stross and Kerr 1990]), but the 'results were disappointing.' Instead, the absorbed residues revealed the presence of willow, cacao, vanilla, and *Datura* (morning glory), suggesting the possible use of a psychotropic. *Datura* is a well-known hallucinogen that shows up in the Postclassic murals of Tulum (Miller 1982). Thus, the recovered data from Pacbitun are strongly suggestive of the use of psychotropic plants by practitioners of ancient Maya rituals, a practice that was likely widespread and that spanned the entirety of their existence (Carod-Artal 2015; Dobkin de Rios 1974).

During the early part of the Classic period, Pacbitun saw the erection of carved stone monuments that are indicative of dynastic connections and ties. We often conceive of Maya sites as being independent, self-sustained units (originally augmented by the idea that emblem glyphs equalled polities; see Mathews 1991), but Pacbitun investigations indicate that this was not the case at any point in time. While the centre may have been more important in the earlier part of the Classic period based on its caved monuments, the archaeology at Pacbitun strongly supports the idea that the site was always incorporated into broader political units (see chapter nine, this volume). Thus, the early stone monuments may have provided legitimacy to the Pacbitun elite, but were likely not reflective of rulership. Pacbitun's leaders played important roles in a broader regional economy for an extended period of time—presumably supplying goods like granite, slate, surplus agricultural products, and musical expertise—and wealth was generated as can be seen in their burial practices and accumulation of elite goods. Rather than representing independent rule, Pacbitun's carved stone monuments were more likely a product of accumulated wealth that were permitted in terms of the broader political system in the early part of the site's history. Thus, even

though relatively wealthy, Pacbitun should be viewed as a Classic period provincial polity (e.g., LeCount and Yaeger 2010) that needed to meet tribute demands. While an argument has been made for more wealth being expressed in Pacbitun's early Late Classic burials, this may be an artefact of ties provided through political incorporation. There is an argument that there was less wealth in late Late Classic burials at Pacbitun because of a general lack of polychromes; however, Belize Valley ceramics in the Late Classic don't focus on polychromes, but rather on red wares (Belize Red; see A. Chase and D. Chase 2012 and Gifford 1976). Thus, what we may be seeing is a regional cultural expression and not an expression of wealth. In fact, Healy (1990a:252) has noted that the main building in Pacbitun's eastern triadic complex yielded nine burials and nine caches, reporting that 'several of these features of extraordinary nature, with unusually large concentrations of offerings;' indeed, one of the Late Classic caches associated with this building reportedly was associated with approximately 100 Belize Red vessels, surely an expression of wealth – and, participation in the larger Belize Valley 'culture.'

During the Late-to-Terminal Classic period, a series of enclosed courtyards on the southern side of Pacbitun are interpreted as palaces (see chapter six, this volume). Investigations of these buildings first suggested that slate was being manufactured there and excavations within their plazas have recovered a series of intriguing burials and caches, including one in Court 3 that is associated with a smashed Ulúa marble vase and shell atlatl finger-loops similar to those reported by Harrison (1999) for Tikal (also see Moholy-Nagy 2008). Both of these items are indicative of non-Maya foreign ties. That the centre participated in other Terminal Classic (AD 800-900) political relationships can also be seen in the presence of modeled-carved pottery within the archaeological record. While it is true that modeled-carved pottery was utilised by both elite and non-elites during the Terminal Classic era (see chapter sixteen, this volume), this kind of ceramic is more likely to turn up on palace floors and in structures near the site centre rather than in rural areas, as is found at Caracol (A. Chase and D. Chase 2004, 2005, 2019b). However, the distributional meaning of modeled-carved ceramics is not fully understood, although it may have something to do with specific political identities (see Helmke and Reents 2008). What is clear is that modeled-carved ceramics largely, but not completely, replaced Late Classic polychrome cylinders and bowls in elite contexts. During the Terminal Classic period there were also privately-focused architectural groups at Pacbitun; the acropolis group associated with Structure 33 appears similar in form to the privately-focused Northwest Acropolis at Caracol (which did not have direct frontal entry). Thus, as occurred at Caracol (A. Chase and D. Chase 2009; D. Chase and A. Chase 2017), there is also a suggestion at Pacbitun that there was a growing gap between elite and other members of society during the Terminal Classic period.

Archaeological data from Pacbitun gives insight into the nature of Late Classic political organisation within the Belize Valley (see chapter nine, this volume). The valley is dotted with a series of smaller centres that are fairly regularly spaced and none of them shows any evidence of having ever been a primate centre (e.g., Chase and Garber 2004). Pacbitun is one of these small nodes. While Pacbitun may have had an independent streak during the early part of the Classic period, especially when Caracol directly impacted the valley because of its conquest of Tikal, Guatemala in AD 562 and Naranjo, Guatemala in AD 631, with the ascendance of Naranjo in AD 680 this situation would have changed. The major sites in the Belize Valley, presumably Buenavista and Xunantunich, were both provincial polities of Naranjo after AD 680. Thus, it would appear that Late Classic Pacbitun would have been one of the independent or dependent allies of either one or both of these provincial polities, depending on the broader political picture in the southern Maya lowlands at any point in time. Thus, the intensification of economic production, as revealed through the production of slate, granite, and possibly agricultural terracing, can be interpreted as being related to tribute demands. Within this scenario, the archaeological data from Pacbitun significantly contributes to our overall understanding of the long-term development and maintenance of relationships for a secondary Maya centre that continued to negotiate its political existence following its extraordinary early florescence. Based on the heterogeneous variety of economic items on which Pacbitun's inhabitants focused over the course of the centre's history—shell, slate, granite, agricultural products, musical expertise—it is clear that the inhabitants of Pacbitun successfully navigated a constantly changing and politically volatile landscape throughout most of their history. However, by the onset of the tenth century Pacbitun found itself embroiled in events that had overwhelmed almost the whole of the southern Maya lowlands and that could no longer be functionally negotiated.