CLASSIC MAYA TEMPLES, POLITICS, AND THE VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

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Temples provide sanctuary, a home for the gods, a place to worship, a stage for ceremonies, a depository for offerings, and a place to redistribute goods. Finally, temples provide an arena for political competition. The role of Maya temples, however, is not so clear. Inscriptions, when present, detail who built some temples, but not if nonroyals built them, if they were built for specific gods, and why the Maya built so many. The presence of several temples in any given center might indicate that various groups built them and that they served as arenas to compete for status, prestige, and power. If this were the case, then people may have had a choice at which temple to worship and support. To explore the politics of temple construction, I compare temple size, location, construction patterns, and ritual deposits at temples at the secondary center of Yalbac, Central Belize. Preliminary results from temple looters’ trenches have exciting implications regarding temple histories in the southern Maya Lowlands during the Late Classic period (ca. A.D. 550–850).

Los templos proveen un santuario, un hogar a los dioses, un lugar de adoración, un escenario para las ceremonias, un sitio para las ofrendas y la redistribución de bienes, siendo, además, una arena para la competencia política. Sin embargo, el papel de los templos mayas no es tan claro. Las inscripciones, si están presentes, detallan quienes construyeron algunos de ellos, pero no si lo hicieron dioses específicos y/o personas no pertenecientes a la realeza, y mucho menos porqué construyeron tantos. La presencia de varios templos en cualquier centro quizás indique que varios grupos intervinieron en su construcción y que sirvieron como arenas para competir por status, prestigio, y poder. Al explorar las políticas de construcción de templos, comparto tamaño, localización, patrones de construcción, y depósitos rituales de los templos del centro secundario de Yalbac, Belice central. Los resultados preliminares del estudio de los sectores de vandalismo ofrecen implicaciones interesantes respecto de las historias de los templos en las Tierras Bajas Mayas del sur durante el período Clásico Tardío (ca. d.C. 550–850).

Who built Classic Maya temples and for what purpose? Cross-culturally royals and other special interests groups (e.g., wealthy families, priestesses, nobles, or community members) build temples because they provide an arena for political competition. Temples also provide sanctuary, a home for the gods, a place to worship, a stage for ceremonies, an arena for festivals and feasts, storage facilities, workshops for the manufacture of sacred and profane items, a depository for offerings, and a forum to redistribute food and gifts. The role of Classic Maya temples—pyramid-shaped buildings topped by flat surfaces for perishable or permanent buildings—in the southern lowlands, however, is not so obvious (Loten 2003; Taube 1998). Nor is it clear who built temples. While kings undoubtedly performed temple ceremonies, we cannot assume that rulers built them all. Nor can we assume all temples served the same purpose or deity. The relatively few inscriptions on temples indicate that rulers sponsored their construction (e.g., Stuart 1995:112), but rarely, if ever, mention donors other than kings, temple functions, sources of revenue, or priests (Miller and Taube 1993:136). I argue that the presence of several temples in any given center indicates that various groups built them and that they served as arenas to compete for status, prestige, and power. If this were the case, then people likely had a choice at which temple to worship and support.

Because the historic record is largely silent on why the Maya had several temples in any given center, we must seek answers from the buildings themselves and construct more creative ways to assess what temple attributes can reveal about their non-material qualities (Jones 2000:2). This approach is

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crucial as “the Maya regarded some, if not all, buildings as animate entities” (Houston 1998:521). To accomplish this goal, we need more concrete information about temple construction patterns and styles. In this paper, I present an exploratory approach to ascertain the politics of Classic period temple construction in the southern Maya lowlands through a comparison of temple attributes. I first discuss temples cross-culturally followed by a discussion of Late Classic (ca. A.D. 550–850) Maya politics and temples. I then present the preliminary results of the first stage of a research project on the temples of the secondary center of Yalbac, Belize (Figure 1), which indicate the potential of temple attribute analysis to reveal the broader social significance of temples.

The Politics of Temple Construction

Religious structures particularly lend themselves
for multivocal interpretations (Ashmore 2002; Hall 1969; Moore 1996:16, 95; Ringle 1999) and multiple uses because "there is an endless flux between buildings and their meanings" (Jones 2000:xvi). Temple ceremonies stir emotions and promote solidarity (Kertzer 1988), an outcome best achieved with a backdrop that inspires and awes (Moore 1996:95–98). Monumental architecture is permanent and materializes the immaterial (Miller 2005) and serves as a means of mass communication (Sudjic 2005:377, 382). Temple environs also serve as a hub for exchange, alliance-building, finding marriage partners, social interaction, and other activities.

Religion is vital for political legitimation because gods support rulership. Monarchs thus conduct royal ceremonies at temples to highlight their having the "mandate of heaven" (e.g., Chang 1983). The king, as the major intermediary between heaven and earth, "acted on behalf of the gods to his people and on behalf of the people to the gods" (Wilkinson 2000:86). The goal of worship is to supplicate gods and ancestors to bring forth prosperity, including rain, bountiful crops, and other good fortune. For example, Aztec rulers sponsored major ceremonies related to rain, maize, and victory in battle (Berdan 1982:51, 115, 132).

While cities have several temples, those that stand out are devoted to patron deities—many of which are funded by monarchs. For example, Mesopotamian city-states had several temples devoted to various gods, including one for their patron deity, whose temple was the largest and most visible (Stone 1997). Such gods stood as the material and spiritual symbol of community identity; thus, it was common for conquering groups to absorb, destroy, or desecrate temples to signify their victory, as was the case in Postclassic Mesoamerica where Aztec victors often signaled their triumph by destroying or burning their foes’ temples and using burning temples to symbolize conquered city-states (Hassig 1988; Smith 1998:163).

Historically, temple priests have used their office for political gain. In Tenochtitlán, for example, each deity had its own temple and staff of full-time priests and lay personnel, the former selected from noble families (Berdan 1982:34, 130–132; Smith 1998:219–220). Aztec priests interpreted sacred writings, "making predictions about the future and attaching meanings to omens. In short, they often made decisions and offered advice on affairs of great political import" (Berdan 1982:132). Similarly, sixteenth-century K’iche Maya of highland Guatemala wrote of top-ranking priests who were drawn from noble lineages (Tedlock 1985:56, 208–209), a situation similar to what Bishop de Landa found in Colonial Yucatán (Tozzer 1941:27, n. 147). The K’iche Maya also had several types of priests who were in "charge of the codices that contained the ritual calendar and divination charts" (Carmack 1981:174–175). Determining propitious dates for royal rites and battles clearly provided priests a powerful voice. For example, Lord 8 Deer, the famous Early Postclassic Mixtec ruler, was the son of a high-ranking priest/royal councilor who, through political (warfare and marriage) and religious (association with the sun god) strategies, took over the throne (Byland and Pohl 1994:135–137, 151, 197).

Temples serve as arenas to challenge the status quo, especially in times of trouble when prosperity is threatened by famine or other repercussions of war, drought, or flooding. People look to others who can better supplicate the gods. Another opportune time to insert one’s political agenda is upon the death of a monarch, especially when succession rules are weak (e.g., in precolonial Southeast Asia and ancient Sumeria [Adas 1981; Postgate 1992:270]). As conduits for political agendas, ceremonies are more successful tools than overt coercion, and are also easier and less costly to organize. Thus, anyone with wealth potentially can sponsor such events, not to mention build temples. Commoners thus can exploit competition between rulers and other groups (Brumfiel 1994).

Given how vital temples are in politics, the building of multiple temples likely signifies competition by various groups for followers—especially as temples link towns to rural hinterlands and serve as intermediaries between people and political leaders (e.g., Stein 1977). Before we can explore the politics of temple construction, we need to identify their builders and the purposes for their construction.

Temples Revealed

Temples attract people because they embody the essence of gods and other supernatural forces (Jones 2000:xvi). In most societies, temple archi-
tecture is distinct from other structures, though their style often evolves from houses (Flannery 1998). Temples are typically centrally located next to other important buildings or facilities, such as palaces, granaries, and markets (e.g., Moore 1996:137). In Mesoamerica, people built temples in center cores near plazas, palaces, administrative structures, ballcourts, and significant natural or sacred features (e.g., caves, springs, mountains [see Brady and Ashmore 1999]). For example, the largest temple in Classic period Teotihuacan, the Temple of the Sun, was built over a cave associated with Chicomoztoc, "the legendary cave or underworld through which humans were believed to have emerged" (Sugiyama 1993:112; see Millon 1981). In a manner similar to Egyptian pyramids, such monuments “operated as visualized memory” and engaged their observers (Meskell 2005:66). Temples typically symbolize cosmological features, often “a reconstruction of the world,” and are built in sacred or special loci and reside between heaven, earth, and the underworld (Eliade 1958:373, 375–376), as was the case for the Templo Mayor in Tenochtitlán. It symbolizes the two sacred hills in the Mesoamerican origin myth and enshrines their patron deities: on the north side stood a shrine for Tlaloc, god of water and fertility; on the south side stood one for Huitzilopochtli, god of war and death (Matos Moctezuma 1995:8). In front of the war shrine stood a sacrificial altar for removing victims' hearts; in front of the water shrine stood a chacmool to collect water and other offerings (Matos Moctezuma 1995:62, 72, 73). The focus on these two gods was to be expected in a society that was founded on agriculture and war. Ceremonial deposits also offer clues as to the significance of temples. For example, the Aztecs offered different items to Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli that reflect their roles—creatures and objects from lakes, rivers, and the ocean to the water and fertility god, and human skulls, knives, and tribute from conquered areas to the god of war and death (Matos Moctezuma 1995:74).

These brief examples highlight what temples can disclose about their intangible qualities, which I argue to be the case for Classic Maya temples. While no two Maya temples are exactly alike, they were still largely constructed along similar lines (Pyburn 1997); thus any differences can be attributed to factors other than imperfect reproduction. Evidence from later time periods provides clues as to who built Maya temples and for what purpose.

Postclassic and Colonial Maya Temples

In the sixteenth-century K’iche Maya origin story, Popol Vuh, its narrators detail the history of their Late Postclassic capital in highland Guatemala, Uatlatlán (ca. A.D. 1400–1524) (Tedlock 1985:71–227). The K’iche built temples for various gods, each of which collected tribute and had their own priests drawn from the ranks of founding families (Carmack 1981:264–281; Tedlock 1985:208–209, 365). The temple of Tojil, their patron sun and sky deity, consisted of a pyramid with at least five terraces and three staircases, and was decorated with painted stucco with an altar on top, as well as a cone-shaped and pillared shrine. Jaguar iconography, the insignia of the Cawek ruling lineage, indicates its role in political legitimation. It faces east on the plaza toward the Temple of Awilix. Eagle iconography predominates at Awilix, which is associated with a powerful, but lesser ranking, lineage, the Nijaib. Less work has been done at this temple, though indications (e.g., green plaster floors) suggest a connection to water and the moon. The temple of K’ucumatz, the feathered serpent, consisted of a round tower between the temples of Tojil and Awilix. While it no longer exists, historical documents describe it as having been ringed on top with carved feathers painted green. The body of the temple represented a coiled snake, and the entrance its mouth. The feathered serpent, later known as Quetzalcoatl, was associated with water and fertility throughout Mesoamerica (Miller and Taube 1993:141). Other Uatlatlán temples have distinctive features as well, as do temples at other Late Postclassic centers (e.g., at Iximche, the capital of the Kaqchikel Maya; Schele and Mathews 1998:315).

Documents from colonial period Yucatán also show that rulers and major lineages constructed temples for specific gods. Bishop de Landa noted several temples devoted to Kukulcán, the feathered serpent, at Chichén Itzá, Maní, and Mayapan (Tozzer 1941:158, n. 804). Lineages had their own gods, and families had their own sanctuaries (Tozzer 1941: 9, n. 44, 18, n. 105). Different nobles hosted and performed various rites at temples, each involving different gods (Tozzer 1941: 27, n. 147, 152–167).

Late Postclassic and colonial historical and archaeological evidence indicates that the Maya
built distinctive temples devoted to specific gods or patron deities with priests drawn from the ranks of noble lineages. Fluid political histories are also indicated (Braswell 2001; Sharer 2005:601, 627; Tedlock 1985). For instance, at the time of conquest the second-ranking family, the Niiaib, was challenging the Caweks for rulership (Carmack 1981:170, 225), who themselves had succeeded the Ajaw K’iche lineage. These examples suggest possible models for understanding the role Classic Maya temples played in politics.

The Late Classic Maya in the Southern Maya Lowlands

In the southern Maya lowlands rulership reached its pinnacle in the Late Classic period (ca. A.D. 550–850). I have argued elsewhere that the most powerful rulers emerged in areas with noticeable seasonal variability and plentiful fertile land, where kings demonstrated their success in propitiating gods through bringing prosperity (Lucero 1999, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c). Maya kings are often portrayed on public monuments conducting rites or performing other activities highlighting their abilities in contacting the supernatural world (Freidel et al. 1993). In areas with large pockets of agricultural land, but without lakes or rivers, the Maya relied on massive royal reservoirs during the annual four to six month drought (e.g., Tikal, Calakmul, and Caracol) (Ford 1996; Lucero 2003; Scarborough 2003); kings performed water rites and organized reservoir maintenance to safeguard water quality (Scarborough 1998). Kings at regional centers near rivers further relied on royal capital to repair subsistence systems and to tide people over for losses suffered when heavy rain or flooding damaged crops (e.g., Copán, Seibal, and Palenque). Kings at secondary centers such as Yaxchilán, Copán, and Palenque (Chase and Chase 1996; Clark and Hansen 2001; Valdés 2001); palace-builders likely round, and farmers were relatively dispersed. Farmers did not rely on rulers or subsistence systems for prosperity, but on the seasonal ebb and flow of the river.

Maya temples likely served as arenas for various noble houses, or even upstarts, to display their wealth and status. Indeed, the hieroglyphic record indicates political friction within centers (see Pohl and Pohl 1994). At Dos Pilas, for example, rulers rose to power when a royal son from Tikal, B’ajlaj Chan K’awiil, broke away due to internal strife and moved to Dos Pilas, where he, after his kingdom was subsumed by a major rival of Tikal, Calakmul, fought against Tikal as an ally of Calakmul (Gunter 2005a; Mathews and Willey 1991; Stuart 1995:267). At the end of the Late Classic at Copán, water symbolism, such as water lily head-dresses, usually a royal prerogative, was adopted by some of Copán’s nonroyal elite (Davis-Salazar 2003; Fash 2005). At Tikal, Moholy-Nagy (2003) argues that the famous “hiatus” (A.D. 557–682)—the cessation of most building and writing programs—might reflect internal political instability rather than external problems such as battles with former subordinate centers and allies (e.g., Caracol; Martin and Grube 2000). Two or three twin pyramid complexes were built during the hiatus (built every katun or ca. 20 years [Jones 1991]). Royal stelae and other monuments were destroyed and deposited in structure fill, perhaps indicating displeasure with royalty, not to mention a play for power.

Scholars also note the importance of inter-center marriages and alliances between royalty and nobility, not just for protection, but also to bolster claims of legitimate rulership (e.g., Pohl and Pohl 1994). This pattern would seem to indicate indeterminate succession rules (see Culbert 1991; Hammond 1991). Other indications include rapid royal successions (e.g., Tikal), the existence of several political titles or ranks (Miller and Martin 2004; Stuart 1995), heir designation ceremonies (Culbert 1991), the presence of council houses suggesting shared political power (e.g., Copán), and the depiction of subordinates alongside their kings in the iconography (e.g., Yaxchilán, Copán, and Piedras Negras). Finally, several centers have more than one palace (e.g., Uaxactún, Caracol, Tikal, and Nakbe [Chase and Chase 2001; Clark and Hansen 2001; Valdés 2001]); palace-builders likely
built their own temples as well. Inscriptions, however, make no mention of those who ultimately played the major role in the building and maintenance of temples—commoners.

Given this political fluidity, the average commoner likely could choose to whom to contribute. I have argued elsewhere that commoners largely were economically and socially self-sufficient at the community level (Lucero 2001). Something or someone, then, had to bring them to centers. In some parts of the lowlands, farmers basically were tied to their fields during the rainy season; during the dry season, the agricultural downtime, many Maya needed water, which they found at royal reservoirs at centers (Ford 1996; Lucero 1999; see Inomata 2005). They flocked to centers and temples to worship and pray, and attended events sponsored by kings including feasts, ceremonies, and ball games (Lucero 2003, 2006b). Maya temples clearly served as beacons to attract the surrounding populace; and as is the case worldwide, the people donated goods and labor to maintain sacred buildings. Thus, those in charge of temples stood to gain in terms of material support. Did different temples serve different gods? Did ruling families build all temples, or did other groups as well? At present, we cannot explicitly answer these questions, even though we know much about Maya temples.

**Maya Temples**

Maya scholars have gleaned much information about Maya temples, especially from centers with iconography and inscriptions. Research has shown that some temple surfaces are stuccoed and painted (Schele 1998; Schele and Mathews 1998:42). Lintels, doorways, doorjambs, and internal walls are sometimes inscribed or painted with vibrant scenes of the supernatural and royal world, usually not visible from the viewing area below (e.g., the Cross Group, Palenque [see Boone 1985]). The majority of inscriptions recount that rulers dedicated some temples, but not necessarily for whom or what (Freidel and Schele 1989; Stuart 1995:99–100, 113). Taube (1998) suggests that temples were modeled upon houses to serve as homes for the gods (see also Wauchope 1938:149–151). The Mayan word for temple, witz, translates as mountain (home of the ancestors [Stuart 1987; Stuart and Houston 1994:82]); temple doorways are sometimes adorned with Witz Monster iconography representing cave entrances (Schele and Mathews 1998:43, 417). Other temples seem to have been built for specific gods or purposes. For example, at La Corona (Site Q) in Guatemala, a panel on a temple identifies it as for a “god of the six nothing place,” some otherworld location for the god K’uhul Winik Ub’ (Guenter 2005b).

The archaeological record also has revealed much about Maya temples. The construction of pyramid temples in the southern Maya lowlands began in the Late Preclassic, by ca. 250 B.C. Temples had terraced façades, often with large stucco masks flanking stairways (Marcus 2003; Mathews 1985), and a flat surface on top, likely for perishable structures. Mesoamerican elites brought the natural world into the cultural one by building topographic shrines that represented caves and mountains (Stone 1992). Maya masks represent sun, earth, or underworld deities, or the sacred mountain (e.g., Cerros, El Mirador, Tikal, Lanmanai, Uaxactún[Hansen 1998; Marcus 2003; Ringle 1999; Schele and Freidel 1990; Taube 1998]). Beginning in the Early Classic, ca. A.D. 250, the iconographic focus shifted from the supernatural world to rulership, where gods were conflated with royal lineages (Sharer 1994:125). The Maya terminated and sealed over most temples, including their masks (e.g., Freidel and Schele 1989). Classic temples with royal inscriptions served as the center for royal ceremonies—private rites performed inside the rooms on temple summits and public ones on the outside overlooking large crowds below, a pattern that continued and expanded throughout the Late Classic period. The Maya added carved and decorated roof combs to some temples in the Late Classic to further extend their height and visibility (Miller 1999:27).

Palace complexes often have restricted temples for private worship (e.g., Copán [Fash 1998]). Here I focus on public temples. The largest investigated public temples at regional centers (e.g., Tikal Temples I and II) face large open plazas that held thousands of people. Temples were acoustically engineered such that those below could easily hear the words of ritual and royal specialists from up high (Houston and Taube 2000).

I concentrate on generalized versus funerary temples as they comprise the majority of public
temples. While many Maya structures contain human burials throughout their construction histories as testaments to the importance of ancestors (McAnany 1995:161), on rare occasions the Maya built funerary temples in a single major construction event as a tomb for a powerful king—never to be terminated (e.g., Temple of the Inscriptions at Palenque, Temple I at Tikal, and at other larger centers including Piedras Negras, Dos Pilas, Copán, and Calakmul). Generalized temples typically share a similar construction history in that the Maya began building them in the Preclassic period and built additions throughout the Classic period. In some cases, generalized temples were not terminated and built over, but were only maintained (e.g., Ashmore 2002; Joyce 2003), signifying ties to past tradition, rulers, or gods (e.g., Temple B-I at Altar de Sacrificios; Smith 1972:79–81). The Maya also emulated earlier construction styles to emphasize ties to deities or past rulers (e.g., Late Preclassic style masks on Temple 5D-33-2nd at Tikal).

To summarize, the largest investigated temples appear to have been more associated with royal dynasties than with gods. Temples without obvious decorative features could be nonroyal, especially if specific symbols were a royal prerogative. The general ambiguity, or even anonymity, of most pyramid temples, however, suggests they had multiple uses, depending on who was performing rites and for what purpose. Maya kings, and probably others, invested much wealth in their political future by building temples and funding elaborate feasts and ceremonies (e.g., Ringle 1999). In this context, rulers and other temple-builders became performers whose success was judged by audience members (Inomata and Coben 2006). Attendees thus were active participants rather than just passive witnesses (Houston and Taube 2000).

**Revealing Temple Histories**

As briefly illustrated, temple variation is well known, especially at large centers with inscribed and decorated architecture. At centers without inscriptions and much iconography, the critical questions are who built temples and for what purpose? To answer these questions, I explore temple variability and its political significance by focusing on size, location, and construction patterns—including style, labor, materials, decorative features, and ritual deposits. I concentrate on Late Classic temple construction phases and number the hypotheses or expectations (1–4) to simplify their presentation. Each expectation has its own particular suite of archaeological indicators (Table 1).

1. If royals and nonroyals built temples for multiple functions and/or gods, then construction patterns and ritual offerings should differ. Royal temples should be larger because royals presumably could afford to build more substantial additions. For example, at the time of its abandonment, the North Acropolis at Tikal was approximately 100 x 80 m with temples up to 40 m high; however, it started out as a 6 x 6 m structure sometime after 600 B.C. (Coe 1990). By the Early Classic, its royal sponsors built increasingly larger additions. Further, even if nonroyal groups had the necessary wealth to build temples, some types of knowledge, materials and/or styles might have been the exclusive property of royals (e.g., Helms 1979:75, 128, 1993:14). For example, kings at Tikal, Copán, and other regional centers incorporated foreign iconographic themes, such as the central Mexican rain god Tlaloc and other elements from Teotihuacán, knowledge to which most people did not have access (Fash 1998; Schele and Miller 1986:213).

The quality of materials also should differ because decorative features require skill, labor, and special materials. Construction patterns include faced stone traits (size, degree of standardization, number of sides faced, etc.), fill type—with or without mortar, thickness, sorted or unsorted fills, size of stones and materials used (e.g., river cobbles vs. quarried stone), and so on. The quality and thickness of plastered surfaces should vary as well as it has relatively high labor costs to prepare, apply, and maintain (Abrams 1998). Core construction bins with different fills could represent the efforts of different groups, communities, and/or work parties (e.g., Inomata et al. 2004; Jamison and Wolff 1994; Schele and Mathews 1998:28). Further, some materials, especially for royal temples, might come from far away. For example, Miller (2001:204) suggests that the Maya brought in limestone from surrounding areas to build Palenque’s monumental architecture based on the presence of “distinctive types of limestone.” Finally, there would be fewer, less diverse, and simpler ritual offerings at some temples, while others reflect more wealth—a
Table 1. Temple Variability.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Expectations</th>
<th>Archaeological indicators</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Various groups built multi-purpose temples</td>
<td>Different labor expenditures reflected in size, construction patterns, and ritual deposits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Royals built multi-purpose temples</td>
<td>Similar labor expenditure, size, and ritual deposits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Various groups built specific-purpose temples</td>
<td>Same as #1, plus variability in temple features such as style, location, orientation, surface symbolism, types of offerings, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Royals built specific-purpose temples</td>
<td>Same as #2, plus variability in temple features such as style, location, orientation, surface symbolism, types of offerings, etc.</td>
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</table>

greater diversity, quantity, and quality of items (Lucero 2003, 2006c).

2. If royals built all temples for multiple functions and/or gods, then construction patterns and ritual offerings should be consistent or similar in scale. Worldwide, rulers fund temple construction, especially temples devoted to apotheosized royal ancestors and patron deities (e.g., Helms 1993:78). Consequently, temple additions should be similar in scale, as well as surface treatment (e.g., plaster, decoration, inscriptions, etc.). The quantity, quality, and diversity of ritual offerings should be consistent or at least similar between temples.

3. If royals and nonroyals built temples to honor specific gods or for other purposes (e.g., special ceremonies), then construction patterns and ritual offerings should differ (similar to expectation #1), except that temple features should vary as well. Temple features include number of staircases, location over or near a cave, reservoir or mountain, orientation, and so on. For example, the largest temple at Dos Pilas, El Duende, was built near a cave and a perennial spring, which was the center’s main water source and likely served as a stage for the performance of water rites (Brady et al. 1997; Demarest 1997). Thus, temple variability might reflect different purposes and/or gods rather than only wealth differences. For example, the presence of an E-Group complex, that is, a temple facing east toward a low platform with three temples aligned north-south, might have an astronomical and ceremonial significance (Aimers and Rice 2006; Chase and Chase 1995). There also should be different types and scale of architectural decoration that reflect differential wealth and purpose (e.g., masks, stucco, painted designs, etc.). For example, Temple B5-sub at Caracol has large masks that represent the Water Lily Serpent, suggesting it served as a water temple (Ishihara et al. 2006); it sits across from Ca’ana, the royal temple-palace complex, whose royal inhabitants likely performed necessary water rites.

Ritual deposits also can reflect the supernatural forces temples embody. For example, painted vessels with cosmological scenes would be telling (e.g., watery underworld, earth forces, sky, maize, rain, etc.). Scholars recently have suggested that certain offerings found in cached lip-to-lip vessels signify the three layers of heaven, earth, and either the primordial sea (Guderjan 2004) or the underworld (Garber et al. 1998). For the former, the domed lid represents heaven, jade and stones the earth, and sponges, stingray spines, shell, and coral the sea; for the latter, heaven is represented by the empty space under the domed lid, the earth by twigs and rodent bones, and the nine levels of the underworld by marl and nine chert or obsidian flakes. The presence of exotic materials, such as speleothems and other items from caves, considered sacred to the Maya as portals to the underworld (Xibalba), also can signify temple purpose. God idols may also be present; iconographic and hieroglyphic evidence suggests the existence of idols—for example, inscribed on the Cross Group temples at Palenque is “housing of the gods within” (Houston and Stuart 1996:294)—though only a few have been recovered (Houston 1996) (e.g., K’awil statues, Burial 195, Tikal; Taube 1992:73).

4. If royals built all temples to honor specific gods or for other purposes, then the scale of construction and ritual offerings should be consistent, similar to expectation #2, except that temple features should vary, similar to expectation #3.

Temple of Yalbac

The secondary center of Yalbac is located near small pockets of good agricultural land along Yalbac Creek on the eastern periphery of the southern Maya lowlands (Graebner 2002a, 2002b; Lucero
et al. 2004 [Figure 2]). J. Eric Thompson (1939:2, 282) made brief mention of an eastern group of Yalbac in the 1930s, but he missed the site core, which we began mapping in 2001. Test pits excavated in Plazas 2 and 3 exposed several plaza floors and yielded ceramics dating from ca. 300 B.C. through A.D. 900. All six temples are 8-to-16-m-high pyramid buildings with flat surfaces at their summits. There are a total of nine looters trenches (LTs) spread out over five temples, eight of which are profiled (Figure 3) (Andrade 2005; Lucero 2005). No matter when the Maya built the temples, surface ceramics indicate that they were in use through the Late Classic (ca. A.D. 550–850).

Temples are located on the two largest plazas, Plaza 2 (ca. 70 x 70 m) and Plaza 3 (ca. 50 x 60 m). Plaza 3 has a formal entrance on its northwest corner; the Maya artificially flattened the underlying hilltop to accommodate this elevated plaza. Plaza 2, in contrast, is accessible from all directions and contains the tallest temple, Str. 2A (16 m), and the site’s only ballcourt (Strs. 2B and 2C). As none of the temples have been cleared of surface debris, it is not yet possible to identify summit features, surface features (e.g., masks, plastered surfaces, etc.), or number of terraces and staircases (Table
The profiles, however, reveal that the temples have cut-stone terraced façades and mortared limestone boulder and cobble core fill. As a consequence of Plaza 2 looters' trenches being located near temple summits, their earlier construction histories remain unknown. We recovered few artifacts from Plaza 2 exposures, especially when compared with Plaza 3 ones.

Str. 2A is the only unlooted temple. It is oriented 8.5°E of true north and is located next to the royal acropolis (Str. 1A) on the west side of Plaza 2. It abuts Str. 2B, which comprises the western half of the ballcourt. The ballcourt is attached to the temple front rather than to the back or side as elsewhere (e.g., Xunantunich and Cahal Pech). Plaza 2 is noticeably free of stone debris, so the concentration of large blocks near Str. 2C could represent a broken *stela* (see Figure 2). Str. 2E is oriented 351° and is just north of Str. 2F; a few sherds and one ceramic disc were recovered when cleaning LT 16, which exposed at least two terraces. There may be an *aguada* to the north (northeast of Str. 2D).

Str. 2F is oriented 351° and has a 1 m tall platform on its west side. LT 11 and LT 21 exposed at least four terraces, but yielded few artifacts (e.g., a few jar and bowl rims and a chert flake). It also abuts Str. 2G, which could turn out to be an artificial sunken pool as it consists of a small, enclosed area with steep walls. During clean up of LT 21 we found a figurine fragment, possibly of God N. A 2 x 2 m test pit near the center of the platform exposed six plaster floors and another higher platform with molded edges (Lucero 2006d). The Maya replastered the platform several times and expanded it in the Early and Late Classic periods. Two Early Classic floors abut the higher platform, indicating that the Maya built it before the lower platform. The uppermost floors show evidence of burning. Recovered artifacts include burnt limestone rocks (some with traces of yellow and orange ochre) as well as fire-cracked chert flakes and cores, chert items (blade, tool, dark blue core, hammerstone, and chunks and flakes), a boulder with a carved L-shaped corner, a few jar and bowl sherds, and a quartzite chunk.

Str. 3A is oriented north-south and has wings on its north and south sides, which could house tombs (Jaime Awe, personal communication 2004). LT 25 exposed at least three terraces and LT 29 two more. During clean-up of looters’ trenches, we recovered sherds from all vessel forms, marine and freshwater shell, and chert flakes and cores. Two potential eroded *stelae* are associated with Str. 3A. Str. 3B is the smallest temple on Plaza 3 and is oriented 351°. It, too, has a possible *stela* nearby. Unlike Strs. 3A and 3D, it lacks wings, though we did recover what was left of a Late Classic burial immediately beneath the summit façade in LT 9 (Figure 4). The remaining lip-to-lip burial vessels contained drilled freshwater shell (*Pomacea*), obsidian lancets, and a shaped and polished jaguar tooth (Figure 5). Clean-up also yielded many artifacts (e.g., vase, handle, lid, flange and rim sherds, a partial vessel, decorated sherds, and chert flakes and chunks).

Str. 3D is oriented north-south and has wings on its north and south sides; together with Str. 3A, it may have served as an E-Group complex or a vari-

---

*Figure 3. Yalbac with looters' trenches labeled, looking northeast. Map generated by Sean M. Graebner.*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>Str. 2A</th>
<th>Str. 2E</th>
<th>Str. 2F</th>
<th>Str. 3A</th>
<th>Str. 3B</th>
<th>Str. 3D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dimensions (m)</td>
<td>45 x 38, 16 high</td>
<td>40 x 36, 8 high</td>
<td>30 x 30, 10 high</td>
<td>45 x 25, 11 high</td>
<td>20 x 20, 6 high</td>
<td>45 x 25, 8 high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volume (m³)</td>
<td>27,360</td>
<td>11,520</td>
<td>9,000</td>
<td>12,375</td>
<td>2,400</td>
<td>9,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Side of plaza</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>East</td>
<td>East</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>North</td>
<td>East</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looters' trench #</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>LT 16</td>
<td>LT 11, LT 21</td>
<td>LT 7, LT 25, LT 29</td>
<td>LT 9</td>
<td>LT 8, LT 26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orientation</td>
<td>8°30&quot;</td>
<td>351°</td>
<td>351°</td>
<td>0°</td>
<td>351°</td>
<td>0°</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Astronomical alignment</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Possible E Group</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Possible E Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of staircases</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Architectural features</td>
<td>Abuts 2B—part of ballcourt</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Attached to 2G=—artificial pool: platform in front</td>
<td>Wings on north and south sides</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Near reservoir, cave, other natural feature</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Possible agua to the north</td>
<td>2G=—artificial pool</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of terraces</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>At least 2 exposed in LT 16</td>
<td>At least 4 exposed in LT 11, LT 12, w/possible summit platform</td>
<td>At least 5 exposed in LT 25, LT 29</td>
<td>~1 summit platform exposed</td>
<td>At least four exposed in LT 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surface treatment (decoration, plaster, etc.)</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summit architecture (perishable or standing architecture)</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burials/tomb</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>LT 9 burial and grave goods</td>
<td>~in wings; LT 8 debris—human skull fragments, decorated sherds, clam shell and other marine shell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ritual deposits</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>~God N figurine fragment</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Lots of sherds, many decorated</td>
<td>Lots of artifacts—tomb? 1000’s of flakes (−shaped quartz, bird bones, sherds from screened lithics)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stelae/altars</td>
<td>~1 eroded stela fragment near Str. 2C</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>~2 eroded stelae fragments</td>
<td>~1 eroded stela fragment</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 4. South wall of LT 9, Str. 3B, showing location of burial.

Figure 5. LT 9 grave goods.
ant. Postholes placed in front of Str. 3D in 2005 exposed a narrow platform ca. 11 cm high (Lucero 2006d). LT 8 revealed at least four terraces and yielded human skull fragments, sherds (vases, handles, lids, bowls, plates, spout, feet), obsidian blades, a slate disc, and a clam shell disc. At the roots of a fallen tree on the northwest side of Str. 3D, we found thousands of thin fine-grained pastel-colored chert blades and flakes, as well as many sherds (plates, jars, basal flange bowls, feet, handles, and decorated vessels) and a shaped white quartz pebble. The lithics likely came from over a tomb—the Maya were known to place thousands of chipped chert or obsidian flakes and blades over the lintel or roof of a tomb (e.g., Moholy-Nagy 1997).

Construction patterns of the final construction phases exposed in looters’ trench profiles, all dating to the Late Classic, also distinguish Plaza 2 and Plaza 3 temples. Plaza 2 temples are more massive than Plaza 3 temples based on total volume: 9,000 to 27,360 m$^3$ (average 15,960 m$^3$) vs. 2,400 to 12,938 m$^3$ (average 8,113 m$^3$) (Figure 6) (see Table 2). Fill boulders are larger in Plaza 2 temples, averaging 569 cm$^2$, compared with 416 cm$^2$ at Plaza 3 temples, and they comprise a greater proportion of the total fill (30 vs. 15 percent). However, Plaza 3 temples have better size sorted faced stone and core fills (limestone boulders, small boulders, and cobbles). They also have more consistent mortared fill in terms of type (plaster/marl) and color (10YR7/2) (Table 3). Plaza 2 temples average more faced stones (19 vs. 12 percent) that are three times larger on average than those of Plaza 3 temples (1318 cm$^2$ vs. 435 cm$^2$).1 Plaza 3 faced stones are smaller with a lesser range in size differences (i.e., more standardized) (251–630 cm$^2$) than Plaza 2 temples (1059–1678 cm$^2$). In sum, the Maya built larger temples in Plaza 2 using larger boulders, more faced stones, and mortared fills. However, they used more sorted fills and standardized faced stones for Plaza 3 temples.

**Discussion**

Current results support the third expectation—that royals and nonroyal groups built temples for specific gods or other purposes. The fact that Plaza 2 temples generally are more massive and constructed with larger blocks suggests that one group built all of its temples, likely the ruling family, while other groups built those on Plaza 3, perhaps founding or noble families. The larger size of Plaza 2 and its greater accessibility might indicate that it served as the major public venue for royal and other events. It should be noted, however, that Plaza 2 temple construction patterns differ from those of the royal acropolis (Str. 1A, 55 x 45 m, 20 m tall); the latter was constructed with a greater number of smaller and more standardized faced stones that range from 235 to 290 cm$^2$ (Figure 7). Further, the uppermost palace looters’ trenches (LT 1 and LT 2; see Figures 2 and 3) exposed vaulted ceilings, a possible roof comb, red-plastered walls, a molded and plastered throne bench, thick, smooth and hard plaster floors, and thick walls (.7–1 m) (Hooper 2004a, 2004b). The Maya had also decorated the royal residence with painted stucco. Alignment differs as well—the acropolis is aligned north-south and Plaza 2 temples 9° or 351°. This is not to say that the ruling family did not fund Plaza 2 temple construction, but that we cannot assume they did.

Exposed architecture in LT 7 shows that the Maya began building Str. 3A (11 m high) sometime after 300 B.C. starting with a small platform ca. 1 m high (Andrade 2005) (Figure 8). Later construction phases are more substantial than Preclassic ones, though not as substantial as the Plaza 2 Late Classic building programs. While we do not know when the Maya started building Plaza 2 temples, ceramics from the plaza test pit date to as early as 300 B.C. (Graebner 2002a). No matter when they started building temples, Late Classic additions are more substantial and could be the result of the needs of the growing, and more politically competitive, community. Evidence from a preliminary survey of Yalbac’s hinterland and surface collections from 78 mounds indicates an expanding population between ca. A.D. 700 and 900 (Graebner 2002b).

The significance of the ballcourt attached to the front of Str. 2A is only speculative at present; together these structures could have served as a stage for re-enactments as ballcourts play a large role in the Maya origin myth (Schele and Miller 1986:243–245). Test excavations in the ballcourt alley yielded several speleothem fragments (Baron 2005), likely signifying a connection to the Hero Twins defeating the Death Lords on the ballcourt in the underworld. Stratigraphic and ceramic evi-
Figure 6. Comparison of Plaza 2 and Plaza 3 temples. The upper profile is the north wall of LT 21, Str. 2F and its associated figurine fragment, possibly of God N; the lower profile is the west wall of LT 29, Str. 3A.

dence indicate that the Maya built the ballcourt in the Preclassic, minimally maintained it during the Early Classic, and rebuilt it in Late Classic concurrent with the terminal construction phases of Str. 2A (Baron 2006a, 2006b). When the buildings were connected, the temple either no longer was used or they moved the staircase to a side (John Morris, personal communication 2004). For an unclear reason, the Maya did not think it important to have an axial staircase facing the plaza.

Str. 2F may have served as a rain and/or celestial temple based on the figurine fragment found...
and its associated architecture (see Figures 2 and 6). While the exact significance of God N is not agreed upon, this deity is associated with sacred mountains and the celestial world as, for example, a sky-bearer (Taube 1992:92–99). God N also is often depicted with Chak, the rain god, another celestial connection. Str. 2F is attached to Structure 2G, a possible artificial sunken pool, which would bolster claims of a rain or water connection similar to the situation at Copán where Barbara Fash (2005; Fash and Davis-Salazar 2006) suggests its residents built sacred pools based on her analysis of water symbolism and artificial sunken pools and plazas. The Maya also conducted public termination rites (e.g., Garber et al. 1998) based on the burned artifacts and surfaces from the platform test excavations, as well as other ceremonies.

The Maya used midden deposits as fill, as we found noticeable quantities of artifacts in Plaza 3 temples. However, artifacts also could be broken items discarded by looters, ritual items left on temples, and/or from nearby ceremonial dumps. If, however, the artifacts are from fills, they could represent different community work parties or special interest groups. We would need to identify construction bins and determine if different fills were used. Plaza 3 temples, however, have more similar mortared fills than Plaza 2 ones (see Table 3).

Plaza 3 temples might represent a necropolis for founding and royal families, based on the presence of architectural wings (Strs. 3A and 3D) and human skeletal remains (Strs. 3B and 3D). The artifacts from Str. 3D likely signify a temple built in honor of the deceased rather than dedicated to specific deities because of the variety of items. If Strs. 3A and 3D also turn out to be an E-Group complex, they could have served as solar observatories and/or for ritual enactments involving the solar/agricultural cycle (Aimers and Rice 2006). The deposit found in LT 9 could signify a more earthly purpose of Str. 3B. Whatever the purpose of the structures, the size of Plaza 3 suggests that a large audience partook in temple ceremonies.

In brief, preliminary results from Yalbac suggest that royals and nonroyals built temples, and that some temples likely served specific gods or purposes. These results, while preliminary, highlight the potential temple attributes have to reveal the intangible beyond that from obtained from biased iconographic and written records, and underscore several issues: (1) this scenario was likely mirrored at other Maya centers; (2) specialized temples built

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**Table 3. Late Classic Looters’ Trench Profile Attributes.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Str. #</th>
<th>LT #</th>
<th>LT dimensions</th>
<th>Fill</th>
<th>Mortar</th>
<th>Average size of faced stone (cm²)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2E</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>8.5 x 1.4 x .7-2</td>
<td>Cobble⁴</td>
<td>Marl w/ sandy clay (10YR62)</td>
<td>1678</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2F</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13.5 x 2 x .8-1.8</td>
<td>Cobble and boulder</td>
<td>Plaster (10YR72, 73) and clayey loam (10YR63)</td>
<td>1059</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2F</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>17 x 2.25 x 1-2.3</td>
<td>Small and large boulders</td>
<td>Sandy loam (10YR52)</td>
<td>1271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3A</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11 x 1 x 1-5.3</td>
<td>Cobble, small boulder</td>
<td>Plaster/marl (10YR72)</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3A</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>3.4 x 2.4 x 1.2-2.1</td>
<td>Large boulder at bottom, smaller near top</td>
<td>Loose plaster/marl (10YR81)</td>
<td>451</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3A</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>11 x 1.5 x 1.6</td>
<td>Cobble to boulder</td>
<td>Loose plaster/marl w/ gravel (10YR72)</td>
<td>239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3B</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10 x 1 x 1.2-2.4</td>
<td>Boulders</td>
<td>Plaster/marl (10YR72)</td>
<td>630</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3D</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Upper: 5 x 3 x 2.5, Lower: 6 x 1.4 x .8-3.1</td>
<td>Cobble and some pebbles; limestone boulder with blue chert nodules, and orangish dolomite boulder</td>
<td>Clayey silt loam (10YR72)</td>
<td>602</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3D</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>6.4 x 1.3 x 1.5</td>
<td>Not profiled</td>
<td>Not profiled</td>
<td>Not profiled</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

⁴Cobbles are less than or equal to 10 cm, small boulders 11-15 cm, and boulders 16+ cm.
by various groups would be consistent with cross-cultural cases; and (3) different groups building their own temples suggest that the Maya could choose at which temples to worship and support.

Future plans at Yalbac, including excavating the unlooted temple (Str. 2A), clearing debris off temples to expose surfaces (e.g., staircases, terraces, decoration), raking plazas to locate fallen stelae and altars, and probing looters’ trenches for ritual deposits and architectural information, should provide the kind of data necessary to address the expectations in greater detail. Further, a comparison with temple data from other centers will allow a broader analysis of the significance of temples and their

Figure 7. Acropolis (Str. 1A), LT 1. The upper profile is the north wall of Rooms 1 and 2; the lower profile is the south and west walls of Room 1. Drawings by John M. D. Hooper.
political roles at secondary and regional centers. Whatever the scale and number of temples at centers, I argue that their role in religious and political life was similar. Thus, while Yalbac is a smaller secondary center, its temples served the same purposes as at other centers—as places for worship, social interaction, and as backdrops for political dramas.

Concluding Remarks

Because of the dispersed resources and worshippers, Maya kings needed to attract people to centers, and temple events provided a crucial means to do so. Royals competed for support among centers, as well as within centers. In the case of Yalbac, its location on the eastern periphery of the southern Maya lowlands and its relative distance from regional centers suggest its relative political independence. Yalbac’s six temples could have served as arenas for political competition between royals, nobles, or priests, whether the temples served the same or different gods. People thus had options regarding which temple to support.

The Maya undeniably expended surplus to build temples. Their political role varied depending on local and regional political histories. Under certain circumstances, nonroyal sponsors could compete with royals for power using temples as their podiums. An opportune time to question royal power is the end of the dry season when farmers were waiting for the rains. Maya nobles, lesser royals, priests, or other groups could promise water in exchange for farmers’ material support. Another opportune time is upon the death of a king; with several candidates vying for the royal position, temples provided the arenas to attract supporters. People thus were involved in deciding who became king, particularly during periods fraught with uncertainty.

While it is not yet possible to explicitly address the role of Classic Maya temples in society, an important result of this exercise has been to question the assumption that Maya temples largely served solely as royal ceremonial stages. The model I present provides a basis from which to begin evaluating various assumptions about Maya temples. There is a possibility that royals built all temples, of course, but with relatively weak succession rules, who became royalty was largely determined in the temple arena. Cross-cultural cases indicate a dynamic and complex relationship between rulers, priests, nobles, and other groups, and it would be difficult to argue that the Classic Maya were any different.

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Notes

1. Measurements were taken of all exposed stone (width and length) in LT profile drawings; it was not possible to acquire depth measurements without dismantling exposed architecture.

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