Ancient Mesoamerica, **28** (2017), 183–185
Copyright © Cambridge University Press, 2017
doi:10.1017/S0956536117000098

SPECIAL SECTION: AFTER 40 YEARS—REVISITING CEIBAL TO INVESTIGATE THE ORIGINS OF LOWLAND MAYA CIVILIZATION

INTRODUCTION

Many archaeologists conduct research on so-called pristine or primary civilizations, that is, those that arose independently without significant stimulus from another center of civilization. But few archaeologists have the opportunity to excavate the remains of a civilization that literally started from scratch (scratched out of bedrock, that is). Takeshi Inomata, Daniela Triadan, and their colleagues did just that when they started digging the deep stratigraphic deposits at Ceibal, in the central Peten region of Guatemala, leading to the discovery of two structures that represent the oldest known monumental architecture of lowland Maya civilization, dating to the early Middle Preclassic Real-Xe phase (1000–700 B.C.). This issue's Special Section offers seven papers that present the excavations, analyses, and interpretations of the Ceibal-Petexbatun Archaeological Project based on the field investigations and analyses directed by Inomata, Triadan, and Kazuo Aoyama at Ceibal since 2005. A word of warning before proceeding: The following papers contain hard-core, dirt archaeology. Those who do not have a taste for detailed descriptions of deep stratigraphic excavations and unexpected discoveries should go no further.

In the first paper, **Inomata, Triadan**, and **Aoyama** detail the rationale for the project, its theoretical background, previous archaeological work, the regional and chronological context, and the broader implications of their findings, especially with regard to the study of the origins of Maya civilization. The central theoretical problem they identify for their work concerns one of the major issues in contemporary archaeology: the emergence of political centralization and social inequality through political negotiation and transformation in broad interregional contexts (A. T. Smith 2003; Pauketat 2007; Yoffee 2004).

As most specialists know, the Harvard University project at Ceibal directed by Gordon R. Willey, with the participation of Jeremy A. Sabloff, Gair Tourtellot, A. L. Smith, Ian Graham, and others, preceded the work of the Inomata–Triadan team by about 40 years. Publications from the Harvard project began to appear in the mid-1970s (Sabloff 1975; A. L. Smith 1982; Willey 1978, 1990; Willey et al. 1975). Inomata and colleagues point out that, along with a related Harvard project at the nearby site of Altar de Sacrificios (Adams 1971; Willey 1973), these excavations represent a milestone in Maya archaeology. Their excavations revealed one of the earliest known ceramic complexes in the Maya lowlands, dated to the early Middle Preclassic (1000–700 B.C.), dubbed Xe at Altar de Sacrificios (Adams 1971) and Real at Ceibal (Sabloff 1975), and thus "Real-Xe" to refer to the combined manifestation at both sites. The Harvard excavations did not discover any architecture from this period, but a significant amount of Real ceramics at Group A indicated to Inomata that this area should contain early monumental architecture. Spatial aspects, most notably an E-Group assemblage accompanied by large platforms and the north-south orientation, hinted at site plans of the Middle Preclassic Gulf Coast and central Chiapas (see Aimers and Rice 2006; Chase and Chase 1995; Doyle 2012; Estrada-Belli 2011:69, 73–74) and provided further clues to Inomata of a possible early monumental architectural complex at this locus of Ceibal.

The second paper, by **Inomata, Flory Pinzón, Juan Manuel Palomo, Ashley Sharpe, Raúl Ortíz, María Belén Méndez**, and **Otto Román**, reports on the excavations and reconstructs the architectural history of Structure A-20, the western structure of the E-Group assemblage in the Central Plaza of Group A. The earliest occupants of the site sculpted this structure at about 950 B.C. by carving a low, flat platform in the natural marl subsurface layer and placing additional clay where necessary. At approximately the same time they also created the earliest version of the long eastern platform out of the natural marl layer using the same building technique. Through a series of superimposed additions and renovations, the western structure eventually grew into a pyramidal shape, and later versions of the eastern platform expanded the structure further to the east. Excavations also revealed numerous caches, many with greenstone axes, along the central axis of the E-Group assemblage. Another important cache discovery from this zone consists of a carved spondylus shell dating to the Real 3 phase (775–700 B.C.) which appears to represent a desiccated human trophy head. Human osteological remains recovered from the same Real 3 level suggest the practice of ritual human sacrifice at this time. These finds indicate that the earliest occupants of Ceibal constructed a formal ritual complex, and its construction and the public events associated with warfare and human sacrifice performed there played an important role in the establishment of this new community. The layout of the E-Group assemblage and the associated ritual deposits suggest close connections with the Gulf Coast Olmec region and highland Chiapas, and thus we see critical information on interregional interaction and the actions and roles of emergent elites in this early period.

In the following paper, **Triadan, Victor Castillo, Inomata, Palomo, Méndez, Mónica Cortave, Jessica MacLellan, Melissa Burham**, and **Erick Ponciano** continue the theme of exploring the actions and roles of emergent elites through their excavations

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0956536117000098 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and interpretations of Middle Preclassic platform constructions. These are extensive basal platforms likely used as residences by elites. These residential compounds saw continuous renovations and remodeling in communal labor projects throughout the Middle Preclassic, from the Real 3 phase (775–700 B.C.) to the end of the Escoba-Mamom phase (700–350 B.C.), a period of about 400 years. The authors emphasize the significance of the practice of constant remodeling and rebuilding of structures in the same location and the importance of continuity of place over generations, materializing social memory. This interpretation echoes the argument of Blake (1991) for Mound 6 at the Early Preclassic center of Paso de la Amada on the Pacific Coast of Soconusco, Chiapas (see also Fowler 2014). Triadan et al. also emphasize, as in the previous paper, the connection with interregional interaction in the development of new norms and social practices.

In the fourth paper, **Jessica Munson** and **Pinzón** address similar concerns through their analysis of the architectural program of the Preclassic minor ceremonial center of Caobal, located on the periphery of Ceibal. They also emphasize the theme of creating community through repetitive practice. **Aoyama** follows with an exemplary analysis of the chipped stone industry and lithic production and exchange at Ceibal during the Preclassic and Classic periods. It is interesting to note that the total chipped stone assemblage from Ceibal totals 34,050 artifacts, of which 32,473 come from unmixed Preclassic deposits, and 27,560 from Middle Preclassic contexts. That is to say, just over 80 percent of all Ceibal chipped-stone artifacts come from Middle Preclassic contexts, and Aoyama notes that this is the largest sample of Middle Preclassic chipped-stone artifacts known from the Maya lowlands.

The next paper, by **Palomo, Inomata,** and **Triadan,** presents the results of the analysis of human skeletal remains from the Middle Preclassic to the Terminal Classic at Ceibal and Caobal, based on a collection of approximately 117 individuals. A principal goal of their analysis was the study of changes through time in mortuary practices and osteobiological modifications during the Preclassic and Classic periods. An interesting trend they find is that skeletal remains of violent rituals deposited in public spaces increased from the Middle Preclassic to the Late Preclassic, and this practice surges again in the Terminal Classic period. With regard to modifications, intriguingly, tabular erect cranial modification occurred in the Middle Preclassic, but this form coexisted with the tabular oblique form at the end of the Middle Preclassic and during the Late Preclassic. During the Classic period, the tabular oblique form, thought to represent the local population, became prevalent. In the Terminal Classic period, tabular erect modification reappears and is thought to be associated with non-local individuals. The authors offer a fascinating discussion of the implications and possible social correlates of these forms and trends.

In the final paper, **Inomata** synthesizes the data and interpretations from Ceibal with data from other lowland Maya sites with special attention to ceramic and radiocarbon chronology. He concludes that the beginnings of sedentary life and ceramic use in the Maya lowlands started roughly simultaneously in various parts of the region at around 1000 B.C. He thinks that a change in maize productivity may have stimulated this shift among formerly horticultural, semi-sedentary groups. Inomata (2017:329) states very clearly that the occupants of Ceibal at this time did not undergo a gradual transition from a small village to a more formal spatial pattern, but rather they built a large, formal ceremonial center "as soon as they adopted a sedentary life." I cannot resist the temptation to remark that we have here dramatic archaeological testimony of a social revolution on a scale that not even V. Gordon Childe could have imagined!

Inomata emphasizes the strong similarity of the Ceibal E-Group assemblage and the construction techniques to those of Middle Preclassic sites of central Chiapas as well as those of the Gulf Coast, the southern Pacific Coast, and the Guatemalan highlands. These affinities indicate that interaction with centers in these regions probably underwrote the major social transformation that occurred at Ceibal at about 1000 B.C. He argues, however, that the early Middle Preclassic residents of Ceibal did not simply adopt this pattern from elsewhere, but they actively participated in a network of interregional interaction referred to by Inomata as the Isthmian Interaction Sphere. Inomata notes that a previously published summary of these research results (Inomata et al. 2013) seems to have caused some misunderstanding of this point on the part of both archaeologists and the lay audience, hence the clarification emphasizing interaction among multiple centers. Inomata and the authors of all these papers stress interregional interaction among diverse groups in opposition to the old debate over unidirectional cultural influence and superannuated concepts such as the "mother culture" that should have been put to rest decades ago (see Demarest 1989). Perhaps this Special Section represents the last nail in that intellectual coffin. To be honest, that thought may be overly optimistic, but current research clearly favors the argument that intense interregional interaction provided the complex social context for the crystallization of the spatial pattern of these Middle Preclassic centers, and the similarities in ritual practices and ideologies materialized in their architecture, artifacts, and caches.

WILLIAM R. FOWLER

REFERENCES

Adams, Richard E. W.
1971 *The Ceramics of Altar de Sacrificios, Guatemala*. Papers of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Vol. 63, No. 1. Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, Cambridge.

Aimers, James J., and Prudence R. Rice
2006 Astronomy, Ritual, and the Interpretation of Maya "E-Group" Architectural Assemblages. *Ancient Mesoamerica* 17:79–96.

Blake, Michael
1991 Paso de la Amada: An Early Formative Chiefdom in Chiapas, Mexico. *In Formation of Complex Society in Southeastern Mesoamerica*, edited by William R. Fowler Jr., pp. 27–46. CRC Press, Boca Raton.

Chase, Arlen F., and Diane Z. Chase
1995 External Impetus, Internal Synthesis, and Standardization: E-Group Assemblages and the Crystallization of Classic Maya Society in the Southern Lowlands. In *The Emergence of Maya Civilization: The Transition from the Preclassic to the Early Classic*, edited by Nikolai Grube, pp. 87–101. Verlag Anton Saurwein, Möckmühl.

Demarest, Arthur A.
1989 The Olmec and the Rise of Civilization in Eastern Mesoamerica. In *Regional Perspectives on the Olmec*, edited by Robert J. Sharer and David C. Grove, pp. 303–344. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Doyle, James A.
2012 Regroup on "E-Groups": Monumentality and Early Centers in the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0956536117000098 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Middle Preclassic Maya Lowlands. *Latin American Antiquity* 23: 355–379.

Estrada-Belli, Francisco
2011 *The First Maya Civilization: Ritual and Power before the Classic Period*. Routledge, London.

Fowler, William R.
2014 Mesoamerica: Complex Society Development. In *Encyclopedia of Global Archaeology*, edited by Claire Smith, pp. 4802–4806. Springer, New York.

Inomata, Takeshi
2017 The Emergence of Standardized Spatial Plans in Southern Mesoamerica: Chronology and Interregional Interactions Viewed from Ceibal, Guatemala. *Ancient Mesoamerica* 28:329–355.

Inomata, Takeshi, Daniela Triadan, Kazuo Aoyama, Victor Castillo, and Hitoshi Yonenobu
2013 Early Ceremonial Constructions at Ceibal, Guatemala, and the Origins of Lowland Maya Civilization. *Science* 340:467–471.

Pauketat, Timothy R.
2007 *Chiefdoms and Other Archaeological Delusions*. Altamira Press, Lanham.

Sabloff, Jeremy A.
1975 *Excavations at Seibal, Department of Peten, Guatemala: Ceramics*. Memoirs of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Vol. 13, No. 2. Gordon R. Willey, series editor. Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

Smith, A. Ledyard
1982 *Excavations at Seibal, Department of Peten, Guatemala: Major Architecture and Caches*. Memoirs of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Vol. 15, No. 1. Gordon R. Willey, series editor. Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

Smith, Adam T.
2003 *The Political Landscape: Constellations of Authority in Early Complex Polities*. University of California Press, Berkeley.

Willey, Gordon R.
1973 *The Altar de Sacrificios Excavations: General Summary and Conclusions*. Papers of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Vol. 64, No. 3. Gordon R. Willey, series editor. Harvard University Press, Cambridge.
1978 *Excavations at Seibal, Department of Peten, Guatemala: Artifacts*. Memoirs of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Vol. 14, No. 1. Gordon R. Willey, series editor. Harvard University Press, Cambridge.
1990 *Excavations at Seibal, Department of Peten, Guatemala: General Summary and Conclusions*. Memoirs of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Vol. 17, No. 4. Gordon R. Willey, series editor. Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

Willey, Gordon R., A. Ledyard Smith, Gair Tourtellot III, and Ian Graham
1975 *Excavations at Seibal, Department of Peten, Guatemala: Introduction: The Site and its Setting*. Memoirs of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Vol. 13, No. 1. Gordon R. Willey, series editor. Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

Yoffee, Norman
2004 *Myths of the Archaic State: Evolution of the Earliest Cities, States, and Civilizations*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0956536117000098 Published online by Cambridge University Press