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PITS AND BONES

Identifying Maya ritual behavior in the archaeological record

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Abstract

In this article, we examine the traditional classificatory terms of cache and burial as they are used in Lowland Maya archaeology and argue that, rather than forming mutually exclusive categories, these ritual deposits are members of a continuum. After discussing the intertwined concepts of dedication and termination and the cosmology of caches, we summarize burgeoning evidence that not all deposits classified as caches are votive offerings. We also discuss the role played by household refuse in ritual contexts. We then describe the investigation of a pit excavated into bedrock beneath a residential structure at the Maya site of La Caldera, in northwestern Belize. Our interpretation of the ritual importance of the pit is based on a series of behaviors that activated, terminated, and then reactivated the ritual pathway defined by the feature. We suggest that this behavioral approach to special deposits is more compelling than attempts to classify the material traces of ritual actions according to narrowly defined terms.

The archaeology of ritual is a compelling topic of inquiry among scholars of the ancient Maya. The especially rich information provided by hieroglyphic texts and pictorial representations, coupled with discovery of elaborate elite burials from several major sites, has allowed scholars to paint a particularly vivid picture of Maya cosmology and ritual practice among the upper strata of society. Similarities in mortuary treatment, religious architecture, and artifact assemblages in ordinary residential groups, albeit scaled down in size and degree of luxury (Becker 1992, 2001; Krejci and Culbert 1995), lead researchers to identify a suite of Maya religious beliefs, such as ancestor veneration and the association of death with passage into the underworld, demonstrating a shared worldview regardless of social status. One of the most prevalent activities affiliated with this worldview is caching, or the placement of votive offerings. Caches are the material residue of ritual actions that consecrate particular spaces, imbuing them with cosmological meaning (Joyce 2001). Yet our understanding of the behaviors responsible for the formation of votive deposits lags behind our ability to reconstruct the belief systems they embody (Walker 1995).

The problem is in part semantic. Most scholars identify burials and caches as distinct kinds of ritual deposits, marked by either the presence or the absence of human skeletal remains. Such a categorization obscures the fact that many deposits contain elements characteristic of both and cannot be so clearly divided. For instance, reinterpretation of elite burials at Tikal suggests that some may have served as votive offerings and are therefore also caches (Becker 1988, 1992, 1993). More generally, by calling certain assemblages—particularly caches—votive deposits, we are making a priori the assumption that the deposit was intended as an offering. Such an interpretation may be inaccurate, however. Recent research demonstrates that some deposits traditionally considered to be caches may instead represent kratophanous deposits or the disposal of worn out ritual objects as ceremonial trash (Maxwell 2001; Walker 1995). The confusion in our terminology, which suggests a lack of clarity in the ideas our terms are meant to represent, has led to calls for a reconsideration of the concept of the votive offering (Becker 1992; Maxwell 2001; Mock 1998; Walker 1995). Using a recent excavation in Belize as an example, this paper illustrates several problems with our current understanding of caches as votive offerings and offers one potential solution. We suggest that a more productive approach to understanding ritual deposits is to examine how burying, caching, and disposing of trash can all serve to establish pathways of sacred space within structures. These nexuses are maintained through time by a multiplicity of ritual acts leaving analyzable material residue. The example presented here also adds to the rare examples of studies of ritual behavior in household contexts, which promise to greatly modify our understanding of the activities involved. As Marshall Becker (1993:49–50, 2001:4) noted, the ritual behaviors of high-status elites and those of ordinary Maya are likely to differ only in the lavishness with which such behaviors are enacted. The cultural rules expressed are the same.

CACHES, BURIALS, AND PROBLEMATICAL DEPOSITS

Caches

Becker (1992:191, 1993:47) defined caches as deposits of ritual objects that are interpreted as offerings. William Coe (1959:77),

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working at Piedras Negras, wrote that "the term cache refers to one or more objects found together, but apart from burials, whose grouping and situation point to intentional interment as an offering. The term is customarily used in Maya archaeology in conjunction with the term 'votive.' " He distinguished between dedicatory caches, which were offerings placed before the completion of construction of structures meant to cover them, and intrusive caches, which were placed in a structure either during or after construction. Dedicatory caches were presumed to be created at the time of construction of the associated structure (or monument), while intrusive caches might serve a variety of commemorative purposes but were not, chronologically speaking, dedicatory to the erection of the structure. Coe described an additional category of terminal offerings that were separate from both caches and burials. He argued that terminal offerings of smashed objects found around structures and monuments were by definition not caches, because they are not hidden. They did serve as ceremonial offerings or sacrifices, however, made at the moment of structure abandonment. In contrast to Coe, most recent scholars implicitly view dedication and termination offerings as two classes of caches, marking the erection or destruction of structures and monuments, respectively. This reflects a decline in importance of the criterion of concealment that was central for Coe. For example, James Garber (1983) distinguishes dedicatory offerings from termination rituals largely on the basis of the broken or unbroken nature of the objects involved, regardless of whether the deposit is hidden or not. Becker (2001) recently suggested the more neutral term "placed deposit" instead of "cache" to avoid the implication of concealment.

Dedicatory or foundation caches include materials that create an association between ideas about the supernatural world and the location of the offering, which is made sacred by the deposit (Joyce 1992, 2001). For example, at Piedras Negras, the contents of two flat-based orange bowls placed lip to lip formed a dedicatory cache on the center line of the summit of Structure O-13. Placed within the bowls were eccentric flints and obsidians, an obsidian blade, several polished or carved jadeite pieces, and shells, including two halves of a *Spondylus* (Coe 1959). These are all precious or exotic "wealth" items, representing the natural world as well as the watery supernatural underworld. In contrast, termination offerings desanctify spaces by destroying the materials linking sacred space to the cosmos (Joyce 1992, 2001). For instance, during the Late Preclassic period at Cerros, Belize, the abandonment of Structure 2A-sub 4-1st was accompanied by termination rites that included smashing ceramic vessels, burning ceremonial fires, depositing molded painted plaster in holes on the building's staircase, scattering white marl on and around the structure, and smashing and scattering jade bead and earflare fragments (Garber 1983). The timing of cache placements and their location with respect to structures is thus a primary determinant of their status as dedication or termination offerings.

It would seem a simple matter to distinguish one from another: Dedication offerings should lie at the basal layer of a construction that subsequently covers the deposit, while termination offerings should be found atop or intruding into a destroyed construction episode. But given the Maya architectural practice of nesting sequential phases of a building, caches that intrude into structures may be interpreted as terminating the function of the intruded-on building but may also dedicate later versions of those structures. The revisitation of ritual deposits that are reopened and later resealed also complicates interpretation, as is seen in the example to be discussed here. Similarly, penetration of a cache into bedrock prior to erecting a structure may be seen as an act of impregnation (dedication), bringing forth new life, or may relate to defacement by intrusion (termination) (Becker 1988:123, 1992:190). Brian Stross (1998:38) wrote that among the contemporary Tzeltal Maya, dedicatory offerings animate buildings by inserting a "heart" (the cache) into structures. Similarly, smashing objects in a termination ritual deanimates them by releasing the soul. The Maya analogy of bodies and houses equates death with termination and rebirth with dedication in a cyclical pattern (Gillespie 2000). The practice of building new structures atop the destroyed remnants of old ones means that ritual offerings can mark both the cessation of life in the old structure and the inception of a new building (Becker 2001:6).

It may be possible to distinguish dedication from termination offerings on the basis of their contents. In many cases, as Garber (1983) observed, dedication offerings include whole vessels and items of value, while termination rites involve scattering broken pieces of smashed objects. Linda Schele and David Freidel (1990:438) explained the significance of this contrast, stating "[j]ust as the caching of whole objects focused sacred power, the reciprocal act was to smash and burn objects to release sacred power prior to scattering or sprinkling." A problem with basing interpretation on contents alone is that, as is evident from the example to be presented here, it is possible to encounter a basal deposit containing broken material, which is neither a clear example of a dedicatory offering nor a termination offering. This may be the type of deposit Mock (1998) referred to when she noted that placement of garbage and broken items in votive deposits symbolizes both decay and regrowth from that decay. The dual notions of dedication and termination, while conceptually diametric, thus should not be seen as opposing acts but, rather, as mutually embedded markers in a cyclical process of birth, death, and rebirth. Such a view of ritual practice and deposition is in fact closely related to current understanding of how the ancient Maya viewed the composition of households and the active role of the deceased as ancestors (McAnany 1995; see also Gillespie 2000, 2001).

Burials

A burial has been defined as "the original interment of one or more individuals in a prepared repository, however simple, together with any furniture or associated material, which may be absent" (Becker 1992:187). Burials invoke customs and rituals that mark the transition of the deceased from this world to the afterworld (Welsh 1988). They therefore provide information about the concepts of death and afterlife as they are perceived in the culture under study (Becker 1992). The degree of elaboration of burials is seen by many scholars as marking the social identity of the deceased. In the Maya world, graves range from simple subfloor preparations through cists, crypts, and tombs. Similarly, grave goods vary from complete absence to elaborate deposits of ceramic vessels, jade earflares, shell pendants, obsidian eccentrics, and accompanying remains of animals or other humans. Such grave goods are to be viewed as offerings just as are objects in caches, the difference lying in their context as burial furniture (Moholy-Nagy 1997). Many Maya burials were neither intricate nor located in special religious structures. Recent research has made clear that, for the Maya, rebuilding episodes often accompanied the interment of individuals within residential structures, and that it was the deaths of these individuals that prompted the subsequent renovations (Gillespie 2001; McAnany et al. 1999). Such subfloor

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burials created permanent links to deceased members of the household, activating the house as a specific, meaningful locus within the landscape, maintained in social or historical memory (Gillespie 2000; Hendon 2000). Placement of the dead within houses creates ancestors whose residence in the house sacralizes the dwelling over time and increases its ritual importance (Kirch 2000). As Michael Coe (1988:235) remarked, "if subfloor burial was the rule for Classic Maya commoners . . . then every Maya house was a sepulcher."

Coe (1959) emphasized that burial implies attention paid to the deceased as a human being, not merely as a votive offering. He thus distinguished burials from caches, even those caches that contain some human remains. While burials serve to dispose of the dead through prescribed mortuary custom, they simultaneously make ritual statements, as do caches (Becker 1992). Coe (1959) acknowledged that caches and burials are often hard to classify because of overlap, either in the terminology archaeologists use to describe them or in the ceremonial concepts employed by the Maya who deposited them. Hendon (2000:47) also noted considerable conceptual overlap between burials and caches, viewing both as "a kind of storage that focuses memory and practice within a particular spatial framework." Becker (1988, 1992, 1993) questioned whether the difficulty lies in the fact that the Maya themselves never conceptually separated caches and burials and suggested that these two categories should both be viewed as types of "earth offerings." In particular, he distinguished between certain burials that seem to have served simply to dispose of the deceased, and others in which the body itself served as a dedicatory offering for the structure incorporating the burial. In this view, some burials act as offerings and are therefore caches. Elaborating on this point, David Maxwell (personal communication, 2002) suggested that if a burial is of a sacrificial victim, then the deposit is also an offering, while if the person interred was a dangerous individual, such as a witch or a sorcerer, then the burial can also be seen as kratophanous (involving the intentional destruction of potentially dangerous ritual objects). Welsh (1988) made a similar argument in his description of dedicatory cache burials, which, like caches, were meant as dedication or votive offerings for the structures, stelae, or altars with which they are associated. Thus, a continuum exists between caches and burials, in which "cache pits need not be distinct from grave pits and . . . cache vessels themselves often were the analogues to complex built tombs" (Becker 1992:186). Such a continuum might travel from ordinary burials to dedicatory burials to mixed burial/caches to offerings.

Problematical Deposits

That the separation between caches and burials is sometimes arbitrary has been especially evident in research at Tikal, where an intermediate category of deposits was defined. During the Tikal Project, deposits containing human bone but possibly intended as votive offerings—which Becker suggested are dedicatory burials—were classified as problematical deposits (PDs) (Becker 1993:63). Similarly, small quantities of human bone that seemed unlikely to represent primary burials were classified as PDs. Many of these deposits are interpreted as representing secondary burials or reuse of midden containing human bone (Becker 1992; Krejci and Culbert 1995). Finally, irregularly patterned deposits of "offered" materials entered the PD category as well. These included unusual deposits of ash that, as Becker (2001) discussed, may be the unrecognized remains of perishable materials burned in caching activities. The name Problematical Deposit alone is an indicator of the impossibility of classifying votive deposits in dichotomous terms. In a survey of Late Preclassic and Early Classic burials and caches, Krejci and Culbert (1995) encountered difficulty cleanly separating the two categories. They assigned twenty-seven examples containing some human skeletal material to the cache category, stating that their context seems more "cache-like" than "burial-like." Such a classificatory criterion acknowledges what many archaeologists do when faced with special deposits: base their assignment on a common-sense "feel" for what the deposit represents.

In addition to dedicatory burials, fragmentary scatters of bone, and offerings lacking clear patterning, domestic refuse found in what would otherwise be considered a burial or cache context was also classified by Tikal Project excavators as PDs. Diane Chase (1988) has questioned whether utilitarian items can be cached as part of a ritual offering and suggests that PDs containing utilitarian objects may reflect a non-ceramic or "container-less" cache pattern. Hattula Moholy-Nagy (1997) reinterpreted large deposits of chert and obsidian debitage found outside chamber burials and sometimes caches at Tikal as production waste, akin to that found in special-purpose dumps. She argued that while these deposits might be viewed as offertory, they should also be recognized as representing the opportunistic disposal of otherwise awkward quantities or kinds of refuse. However, Maxwell (personal communication, 2002) suggested that deposits of large quantities of material such as obsidian may represent the ritual interment of waste that was produced through the manufacture of cache blades or other sacred objects. Because of the sacredness of this pre-depositional behavior, then, the debris itself must be deposited with or in the same manner as other ritual materials.

Moholy-Nagy explicitly identified the practice of incorporating non-ritual objects or waste products in what are otherwise considered ceremonial contexts. She cited structure caches found at both Uaxactun and Altun Ha that included domestic refuse such as chert flakes and cores, obsidian flakes and cores, and shell. Moholy-Nagy (1997:299) defined a PD as an "intentional deposit of problematical nature," emphasizing that, despite its unusual contents and uncertain function, the identity of a PD as a special deposit is not in question. According to this definition, PDs incorporating domestic refuse should not be discounted as ceremonial deposits solely on the basis of a seeming disjuncture between contents and context.

As the preceding discussion amply illustrates, the archaeological categories of cache, burial, and PD cannot be cleanly separated; neither did the Maya view them as representative of mutually exclusive conceptual spheres. Therefore, insight into the origins and meanings of these special deposits must come from an approach that melds an understanding of the cosmology that such deposits embodied to an explicit focus on the ritual behaviors responsible for their creation. Such behaviors, we argue, served to activate, terminate, and often reactivate sacred spaces and ritual pathways in recursive, not linear, fashion.

SACRED TOPOGRAPHY

It has been argued that in Classic Maya sites, the placement of offerings within structures "enhance[s] their power to function . . . as portals to the Otherworld" (Schele and Freidel 1990:438; see also Chase and Chase 1998). Caches and burials are fre-

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quently found along the axial lines of a building, in such locations as under stairs, within benches, and cut into floors. The intersection of horizontal and vertical axes in a structure is an extremely critical point. Here, as David Pendergast (1988) discussed, is the main avenue of communication with deities, many of whom are thought to have resided in the underworld (see also Gillespie 2000; Joyce 1992). In his ethnographic studies at Zinacantan, in the highlands of Chiapas, Evon Vogt (1998) noted that at the center of a room floor, where the two horizontal axes of a structure intersect with the vertical axis, is often found a sacrificial pit in which offerings are made. The pit serves as a connection to the underworld. In what Vogt (1981:120) called the "sacred topography" of the Maya, caves, cenotes, and other marked sites on the landscape such as mountains, passes, or even notable rocks or trees served as conduits between the world of the living and the supernatural world. Features such as pits, chultuns, and tombs may be seen as architectural manifestations of natural caves, which in the Mesoamerican worldview serve as portals between the real world and the supernatural (Bassie-Sweet 1991:125). Similarly, the interiors of buildings containing caches or burials also symbolize the underworld (Chase and Chase 1998). Portals and other liminal spaces are thus major foci of ritual activities (Mock 1998:6).

Andrea Stone (1995) suggested that, for the Classic Maya, caves served as "topographic shrines," substituting for architecture. The converse is also true. Caves and mountains, home to both ancestors and gods, are twin concepts in Maya cosmology and can be represented architecturally. Mountains are replicated by the stepped form of Maya pyramids and, more generally, by Maya houses (Vogt 1998:26). Thus, just as caves penetrate mountains, pits penetrating the floors of Maya houses represent in architecture the cave–mountain dyad. Caves are often used for sweeping away or disposing of undesirable objects (Stone 1995). Stone drew an analogy between ritual disposal into a natural hole and ceremonial deposition or burial into an artificial one. In this context, she found "a strong operational overlap between caves and cache holes or ritually constructed holes" (1995:36). Since caves are liminal between this world and the underworld, they play a transformative role in serving as receptacles for offerings. In such a transformation, objects from the everyday world become objects of the sacred world. Similarly, through a ceremonial act buried caches transfer material goods to the sacred realm.

Finally, caves, which often feature droplets of water falling from stalactites, can also be seen as repositories of pure water (Stone 1995:17). This strengthens their association with the underworld, which is portrayed as watery in Mesoamerican cosmology, as well as with sources of life and fertility. Shells and fauna from marine environments are common objects in caches, establishing links both with the natural world and the supernatural realm (Joyce 1992). The presence of stingray spines may indicate bloodletting, a behavior that is interpreted as "vital in providing sustenance for the gods, by opening a portal to the spirit realm or 'Otherworld,' and in inducing visions" (Maxwell 2000:91). Maxwell argued that because many of the marine objects are also toxic, they may have been employed to induce an altered state of consciousness; this was another method of opening the portal to the watery underworld. The association of water with subterranean pits is not only symbolic, however, as recent research indicates (Weiss-Krejci 2000; Weiss-Krejci and Sabbas 2002). Estella Weiss-Krejci (2000) attributed to small depressions a critical function as receptacles for water, and she documents such attributes as steps leading down into pits.

Caches represent sacred aspects of the earth, including mountains, caves, and water, and the topographic relationships among them. They also symbolize links to important supernatural forces, including deities, which reside within or can be reached through connections to these elements. Caches do more than symbolize, however. They transport objects and people between this world and the Otherworld. They activate channels of communication and portals of travel between the natural and the supernatural. As with the behaviors that create cache deposits, movement along the ritual pathways they create is nonlinear.

SACRIFICIAL OFFERINGS, KRATOPHANOUS DEPOSITS, AND CEREMONIAL TRASH

Despite the progress made in refining our understanding of burials and caches as part of a continuum rather than as dichotomous categories, care must still be taken not to misinterpret all caches as votive offerings (Maxwell 2001; Walker 1995). William Walker has criticized the tendency of archaeologists to assign an offertory role to any unusual deposit and argued that disparate deposits classified as dedicatory deposits, termination offerings, and caches are often misidentified and may be better understood as residues of a variety of different ceremonial behaviors. By emphasizing the behavior responsible for the formation of these kinds of special deposits, rather than the belief system underpinning them, Walker is suggesting that we have the ability to distinguish votive caches from ritual objects entering into the archaeological record in nonoffertory contexts. For instance, sacrificial offerings consist of whole, still functioning objects taken out of ordinary context and placed in archaeological deposits as part of a ritual (Walker 1995:76). These deposits are the closest to what is traditionally considered a cache and should consist predominantly of unbroken and unusual materials (Maxwell 2001). In contrast, kratophanous deposits result from the intentional destruction or termination of powerful ritual objects and their disposal in specialized contexts (Walker 1995:76). Such deposits may be recognized archaeologically as containing dangerous or unusual items that are intentionally broken or burned (Maxwell 2001). Finally, ceremonial trash is formed by the discarding of ritual objects that have reached the end of their useful lives. They may be worn out, obsolete, or broken, particularly in the course of use (Walker 1995:75). As Becker (2001) notes, used-up ritual objects, especially perishable ones, may also be burned and then deposited as ashes. Walker's (1995) study led him to conclude that ritual objects frequently enter the archaeological record as ceremonial trash, but are often misidentified as votive offerings (see also Becker 2001:3).

Maxwell (2001) used Walker's categories to reassess caches of stingray spines from Tikal. Finding that whole and fragmentary stingray spines never co-occur in the same special deposit (cache or PD), he suggested that different ritual behaviors were responsible for their formation. While Maxwell interpreted deposits of whole stingray spines as votive offerings (Walker's sacrificial offerings) in keeping with traditional classifications, he found that deposits of broken stingray spines are best considered kratophanous deposits, formed by the intentional destruction and deposition of spines used in other ceremonial contexts. He concluded that not all caches are votive offerings and emphasized that attention must be paid to the multiplicity of behaviors responsible for the formation of caches.

In a recent article, Jeffrey Blomster (1998) reconstructed the sequence of events responsible for the stratified contents of a bell-

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shaped pit excavated into bedrock at the site of Etlatongo, Oaxaca, Mexico. The pit contained a broken "hollow baby" sculpture as well as several other unusual objects, including the partially articulated skeleton of a canid. These objects were located toward the base of the pit in a stratum of compacted soil mixed with artifacts. Above these items was a thick deposit of looser soil containing abundant artifacts and charcoal. This deposit, which filled the remainder of the pit as well as the entrance shaft, was capped by a layer of masonry and adobe blocks that sealed the chamber. Blomster suggested that the pit may originally have served as a household storage pit, but that later objects involved in rituals, including the hollow baby, were stored in it when not in use. Alternatively, the ritual objects may have been cached in the pit at the end of their use lives. The cessation of ritual activity involving these objects was marked by the deposition of the canid skeleton in the bottom of the pit. To fill the pit rapidly, residents first dumped household trash, then sealed the deposit with blocks.

We can use Blomster's reconstruction to illustrate how a series of different actions can lead to the creation of a special deposit. This discussion marks a shift in emphasis away from the contents of caches and towards the behaviors that result in their formation. The placement of still viable ritual objects in the pit when not in use is an example of caching in a non-votive (or storage) context. Alternatively, if the hollow-baby sculpture (which was slightly broken prior to its final interment) and associated objects were deposited at the end of their use lives, then they represent the discard of ceremonial trash. The placement of the largely intact canid skeleton marking the cessation of ritual activity may denote a kratophanous deposit or what is more usually called a termination offering. Finally, the dumping of household refuse to both fill the pit and terminate its use is an instance of using otherwise ordinary materials in extraordinary context to mark a ceremonial event. According to Moholy-Nagy (1997), this practice has both ritual and practical connotations.

Walker's emphasis on the behavioral basis of special deposits and our activity-focused reconstruction of the creation of Blomster's pit deposits highlight the advantages of approaching the interpretation of caches and other special deposits from a behavioral perspective. By emphasizing the multiple, potentially cross-cutting activities that resulted in the archaeological residues we study, we move away from the identification of caches as reified objects and toward an understanding of how behaviors including storing, burying, caching, dumping, and reusing all contribute at different times and in varying circumstances to the creation of ritual spaces and objects.

A COLUMN OF SACRED SPACE

The preceding discussion suggests that understanding the special deposits that demarcated sacred space in the Maya world is fraught with interpretive difficulty. Our current scheme of categorization has forced us to divide related classes of special deposits and to marginalize those we cannot easily classify. Deposits may be burials, caches, or cache-like dedicatory burials. They may represent ceremonial trash or kratophanous deposits. They may be dedication offerings, termination offerings, or both simultaneously. Pits dug for mundane purposes, such as quarrying, food storage, or water collection, may later serve ritual purposes, or vice versa. Household trash may be incorporated into ritual deposits opportunistically, but may also be a hitherto unrecognized aspect of ritual. Given this complexity, how can we interpret these disparate features and gain insight into Maya ritual behavior and the contexts in which it occurred? In the following example, we examine the ritual potential of a trash-filled pit carved into the bedrock beneath a residential structure. We suggest that the vertical shaft defined by the pit served as a pathway of sacred space throughout several renovations of the encompassing structure, even as the sequence of actions responsible for the formation of the feature stemmed from behaviors as varied as caching, household trash deposition, and burial.

Excavation

The site of La Caldera lies about 3 km northwest of the regional center of La Milpa in northwestern Belize (Figure 1). La Caldera consists of 73 structures arranged in 32 architectural groupings; the central portion of the site discussed here features 35 structures arranged in six groups (Figure 2). The principal group (Group A) features a formal plaza surrounded by seven range structures and a large pyramidal building on the eastern side. Several groups of patios surrounded by multiroom buildings and platforms (including Groups B, E, and F) are located near the principal structures, and suggest elite residences. The remainder of the architecture at the site consists of groups of large masonry buildings and smaller plaster-topped stone-faced rubble platforms. Occupation of the site began in the Late Preclassic and continued until abandonment during the Late/Terminal Classic (Kerry Sagebiel, personal communication 2000).

Group F consists of 13 structures arranged around a pair of patios 120 m northeast of the principal group. It is the largest group of architecture at the site in terms of number of structures, and second only to Group A in area. Group F's two patios are separated by a rectilinear structure that forms the eastern side of Patio 1 and the western side of Patio 2. An excavation into this building (Structure 3-F-10) revealed an unusual trash-filled pit carved into the bedrock beneath it (Figure 3). Structure 3-F-10 began as a small rubble platform with a limestone cobble retaining wall and a plaster surface. A renovation converted the platform into a larger multi-roomed structure with masonry walls. Several resurfacing episodes resulted in the laying of a series of three plaster floors. The addition of a terrace on the west side of the structure reveals that the front of the building faced west (and thus the structure's primary orientation was as the eastern building of Patio 1). Finally, the entire structure was filled in with compact limestone rubble to form a tall platform, with a presumably now eroded surface at the top. All of this construction appears to have taken place during the Late/Terminal Classic period (A.D. 750–850).

Excavation down through the room floors inside the front structure wall revealed a series of typical subfloor rubble deposits. As we reached bedrock at 210 cm below surface, however, we encountered a depression cut into the bedrock beneath the structure. By digging sideways beneath the sturdy floors, we were able to uncover the entire pit, which lay largely under the north baulk of the excavation unit. Removal of the cobble fill between room floor 2 and the lip of the pit revealed three human interments. The remains had been buried in the construction fill through holes cut into the floor, which were then patched with plaster. The patches were clearly visible when looking up at the underside of the floor. The first burial (Burial 7 in the La Caldera sequence) was of an adult of unknown sex, age 25–40. The body was laid in a flexed position on its back with the head pointing north. The second burial (Burial 6) was of a young adult male, age 20–30. The body

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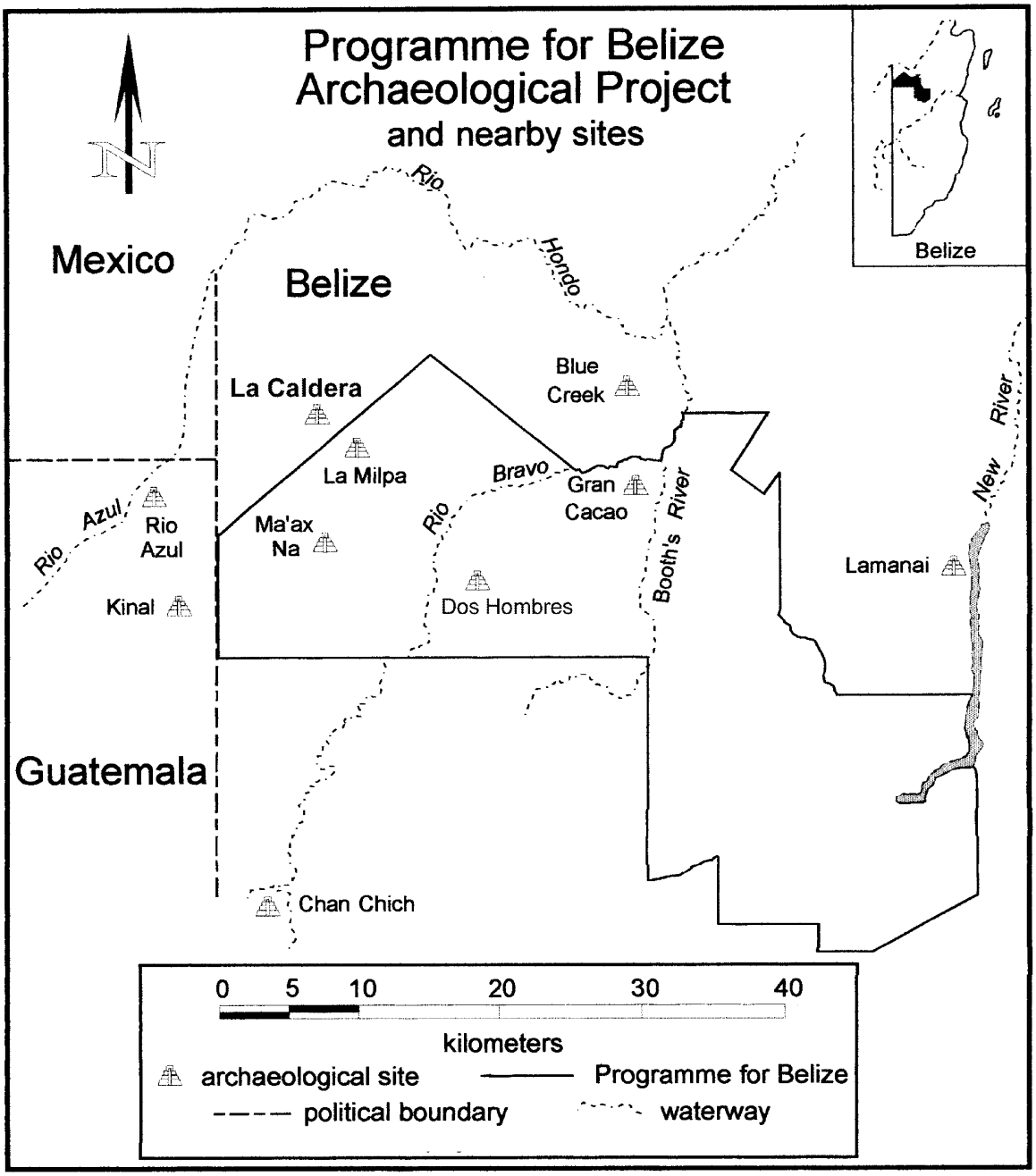


Figure 1. Map of northwestern Belize, showing the locations of La Caldera and La Milpa in relation to other sites of the region. Map after Jon C. Lohse; courtesy Programme for Belize Archaeological Project.

was flexed, with the head pointing south. The third burial (Burial 5) was inserted into the upper part of Burial 6, thus disturbing it. We infer that the body was buried through the same patch in the floor, which may have been reopened and repatched at a later time for this purpose. Burial 5 was of a young adult male, age 25–30. The body was on its left side in a flexed position with the head pointing south. Burial 5 was accompanied by a tooth offering consisting of a human canine with decorative carving. This is the only grave good associated with any of the three burials. Both Burial 7 and Burial 5 feature an anomalous hammate with no hamulus, suggesting a possible familial relationship (Julie Saul, personal communication 2000).

After the burials were removed, excavation continued downward through the fill to the lip of the pit. A layer of large boulders was found capping the deposit inside the feature. Beneath this, the pit contents consisted of a dark, compact fill containing abundant charcoal and a diverse array of artifacts. In fact, the fill was essentially all cultural, with practically no soil in it. To facilitate accurate recording of artifact locations, we divided the pit into quadrants and excavated each in arbitrary 20 cm levels. All special finds, including obsidian blades, chert bifaces, faunal material, shell objects, and skeletal fragments, were piece-plotted.

We recovered over 6,000 sherds (many of them polychrome), 25 intact bifaces, more than 50 broken obsidian blades, five pieces

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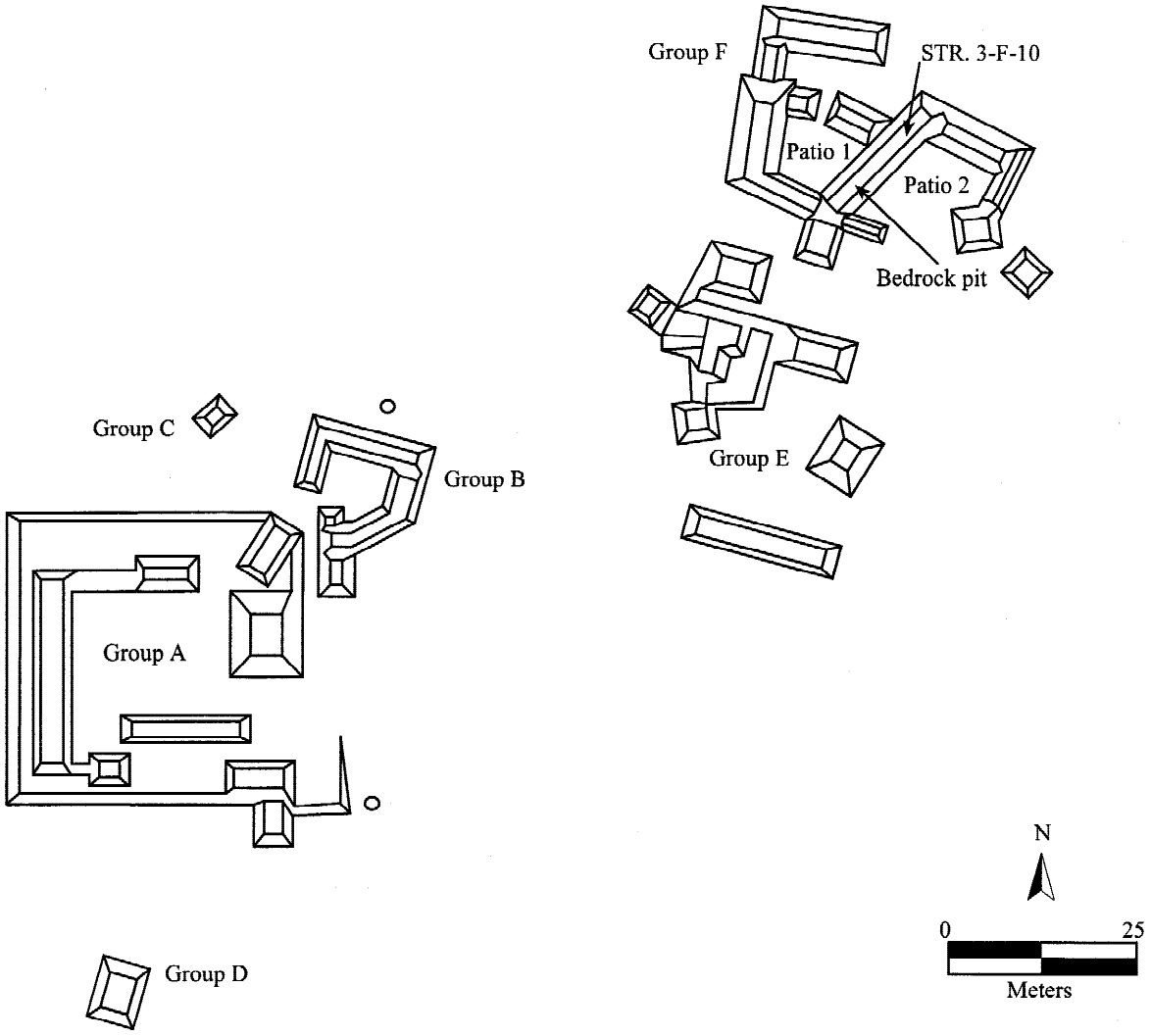


Figure 2. Map of central portion of La Caldera showing location of structure under which bedrock pit was located.

of groundstone, seven pieces of marine shell, and 45 pieces of animal bone, many of them worked. Some of the more unusual finds include seven modified sherds, one ceramic spindle whorl, one ceramic figurine fragment, and 11 carved and polished bone fragments, several of them awls or needles. One needle featured a serpent carved around the shaft. Other finds include two bone beads, four polishing stones, and two carved marine shells, including one carved in the shape of a caiman's head (Figure 4). In total, we collected more than twice the number of sherds, almost twice the number of bifaces, and more than three times the number of obsidian pieces recovered from any of the six excavations in nearby structures. However, as Tables 1 and 2 demonstrate, despite the density and large number of artifacts found in the pit, neither the artifact count per base weight of ceramics nor the ratio of nonceramic artifact to ceramic artifact weight is substantially different in this excavation from any of the six nearby structure excavations.

After the fill inside the bedrock pit was completely removed, we were able to observe several notable aspects of the feature itself, whose bottom was located at 320 cm below surface (Figure 5). The pit measured 2.1 m × 1.6 m, with the long axis running northeast–southwest. It was 1 m deep from the lip to the bottom and was roughly oval in shape. On the southwestern end the sides of the pit were slightly undercut, while the remaining walls were vertical. Parallel marks left by the tools of those who carved the pit were still visible all around the pit walls, demonstrating unequivocally that the feature is artificial. On the north end, two steps carved out of bedrock lead down to the bottom of the pit. Each step is between 10 and 20 cm high. On the east side of the pit was a niche carved into the wall. The niche is slightly below the lip of the pit and was roughly 30 cm high and 18 cm deep. It was found empty.

Interpretation

To address the behaviors that resulted in the creation of the bedrock pit and its associated deposits and to assess its role as a locus of ritual, we analyze the feature in terms of three principal attributes: its location in relation to the structure above it, its contents, and its design. Chase (1988) refers to these three aspects as context, content, and container.

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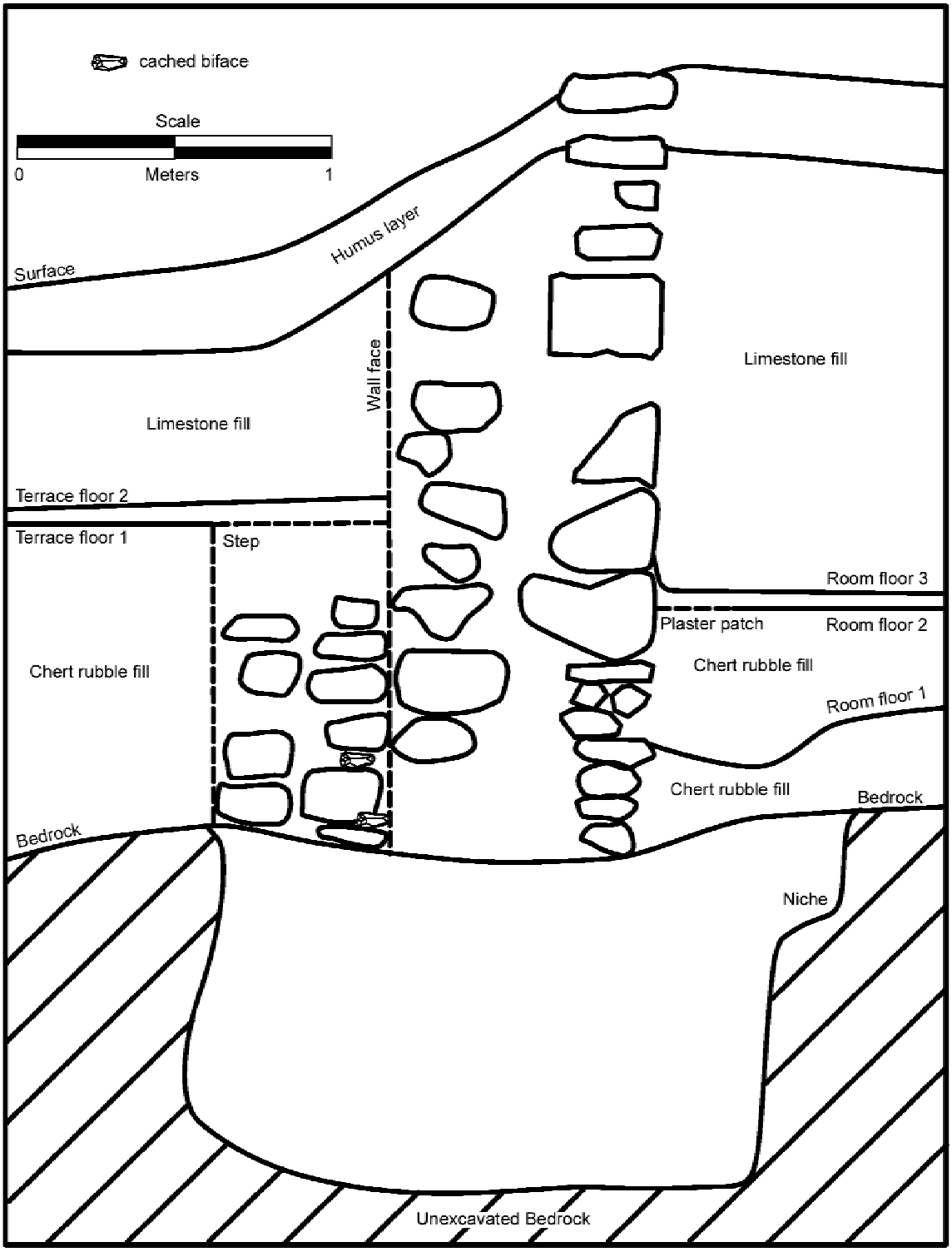


Figure 3. Profile drawing of excavation illustrating location and design of bedrock pit in relation to overarching structure.

Context

Votive offerings can be analyzed along several dimensions. One that is pertinent here is what Leonardo López Luján (1998) refers to as external syntax. An important aspect of external syntax is the placement of ritual deposits with reference to axial lines in the related structure (see also Pendergast 1998; Vogt 1993). These lines can be either horizontal or vertical (López Luján 1998:178). Unfortunately, we are uncertain as to the placement of the pit in the horizontal plane with relation to the overarching structure,

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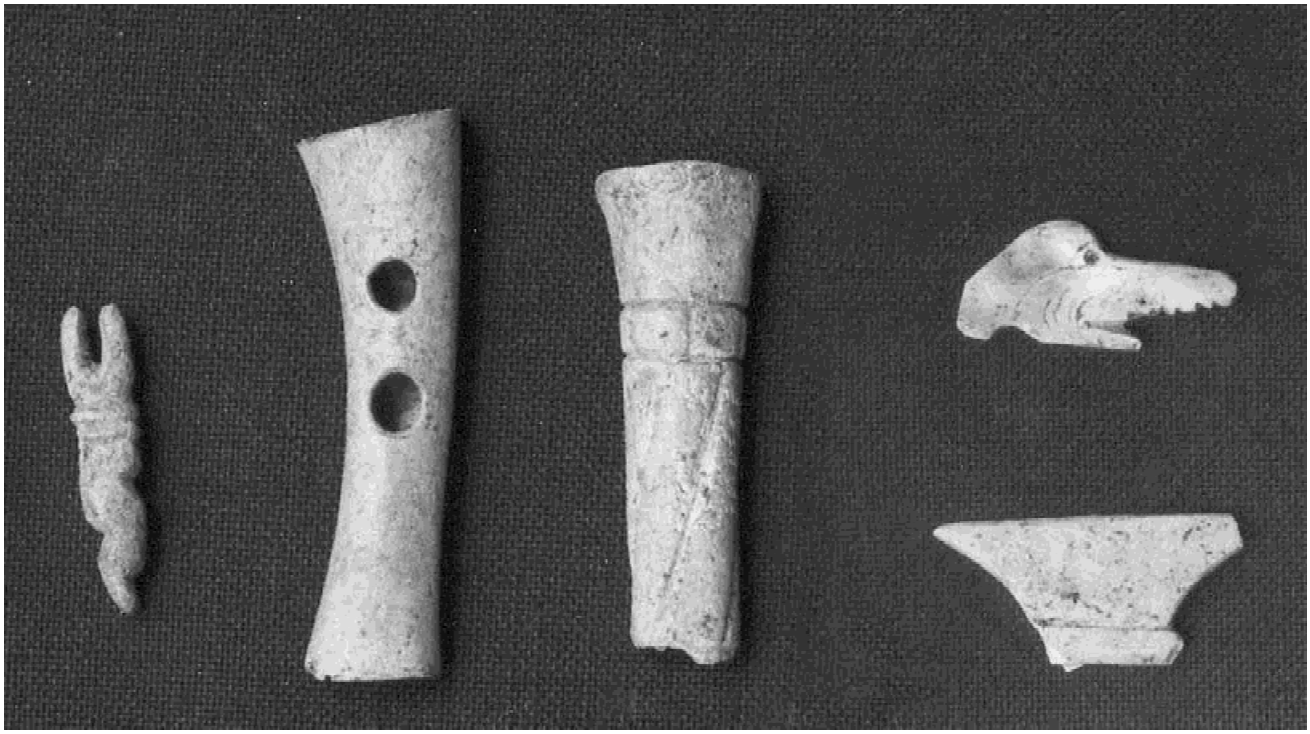


Figure 4. Bone and shell objects from fill of bedrock pit. Photo by Heather Knustrom.

because time constraints did not permit the stripping of the building. Therefore, we do not know exactly where the corners lie. However, based on the surveyed dimensions of the building, the pit appears to lie near the center of the structure. Moreover, the orientation of the building's principal axis is 45°, as is the long axis of the pit.

The vertical axis provides stronger evidence in favor of viewing the pit as a locus of ritual. Natural elements that serve as vertical connectors among the layers of the universe—such as caves that link the earth to the underworld, mountains that link the earth to the sky, and the world tree, with roots in the underworld and branches in the sky—are imbued with sacred symbolism (Ashmore 1992; Gillespie 1993; Tate 1992). These objects share an emphasis on verticality with objects of the human realm, such as rulers and stone stelae, to which the same power of linkage is attributed. A vertical space seen as connecting the underworld, terrestrial world, and heavenly world, would thus be viewed as sacred. Rosemary Joyce (1992) refers to axial lines marked by ritual deposits as pathways of ritual action. Thus, the vertical axis through the structure, once activated by the carving of the bedrock pit, served as a ritual pathway between the occupants of the building and the supernatural world. The column of space above the pit was revisited at least three times in later years, when subsequent versions of the structure were occupied, for the burial of three people in the fill beneath a room floor. As the pit would have been buried under almost 2 m of fill, knowledge of its location must have been retained by certain of the structure's occupants. Such "knowledge of a hidden dimension of social and physical space" (Hendon 2000:49) contributes to the creation of social or historical memory, which maintains the

Table 1. Comparison of nonceramic artifact counts per 1,000 grams of ceramics

		Operation					
Artifact Type	Bedrock Pit	V62A	V63A	V65A	V66D	V67A	V68A
Bifaces	.2819	.1687	.6956	0	.4876	.1632	.6660
Obsidian	.5437	1.6871	.7949	.6832	.7662	0	0
Groundstone	.0805	.3374	.0497	0	.4179	.0816	.1665
Shell	.0705	.3374	.0994	0	.5573	0	.1665
Fauna	.4833	.3374	0	2.7326	.1393	.0816	0

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Table 2. Ratio of non-ceramic to ceramic artifact weights

		Operation					
Artifact Type	Bedrock Pit	V62A	V63A	V65A	V66D	V67A	V68A
Bifaces	.0406	.0012	.0966	0	.0854	.0195	.1323
Obsidian	.0003	.0011	.0005	.0009	.0006	0	0
Groundstone	.0248	.2927	.0295	0	.2379	.0273	.0240
Shell	.0002	.0004	.0001	0	.0004	0	.0001
Fauna	.0000	.0001	0	.0008	0	0	0

physical structure as an embodiment of social relations among its occupants, both living and deceased (see also Gillespie 2000).

Content

As noted in the excavation summary, there are three pertinent strata associated with the bedrock pit. The uppermost is the subfloor fill found beneath the middle plaster floor and above the lip of the pit (the badly eroded and fragmentary lower floor and its associated fill were also removed but are not critical to this discussion). This stratum is a typical mix of chert and limestone cobbles and domestic refuse used as construction fill. The three burials located in this layer were placed in the fill without the preparation of a formal grave or (with the exception of the tooth offering) the inclusion of burial goods or furniture. The next stratum is the layer of limestone boulders that seals the deposit inside the pit. This level seems also to have served as a stable foundation for the construction of the structure above it. The boulder layer cannot be distinguished from an adjacent stratum of limestone rocks that forms a retaining pen for fill under the more formal masonry walls of the building. Finally, below the boulders is the fill inside the pit itself, which, as noted earlier, contained abundant sherds, chert lithics, obsidian, animal bone, and shell, as well as charcoal.

Although the pit yielded enormous quantities of cultural material, it did not contain objects typically included in Maya caches. There are no no lip-to-lip vessels, no *incensarios*, no whole ceramic pots of any kind. There are no jades, no obsidian or chert eccentrics, no bloodletting paraphernalia or spiny oyster shells. There are no special pigments or mineral crystals. Although there are animal bones, there are no articulated skeletons suggestive of deliberate burial. One piece of evidence that would strengthen the interpretation of the bedrock pit and its contents as a ritual deposit would be the presence of patterning in the objects that *are* found in the deposit. Ritual deposits often contain sacred numbers of objects, such as 4, 9, or 13 (Joyce 1992; Mock 1998). They also sometimes contain objects pointing in particular directions or concentrations of certain classes of objects in particular quadrants of the pit (Chase 1998). Several scholars (Garber et al 1998; Joyce 1992; López Luján 1998) have found that the horizontal and vertical layering of objects in a ritual deposit can be representative of the multiple layers of the cosmos. Similarly, Prudence Rice (1999) noted that the stacking of *incensario* fragments in votive caches is a representation of the layers of the universe. These are all aspects of what López Luján refers to as internal syntax. Piece-plotting of all special finds allows us to examine these possibilities with reference to the fill of the bedrock pit (Figure 5). Based on our mapping of artifact location, we do not see objects pointing in a particular direction or grouped in a quadripartite manner. Neither is there evidence for the layering of objects within the deposit.

Ritually significant numbers of unusual, whole objects occur in the fill of the pit. The feature contained 24 intact bifaces, two whole bone beads, eight unbroken bone needles, and two whole shell ornaments. Based on a quadripartite division of space representative of the four world directions (see later for a more detailed discussion), these objects present a set of four bifaces for each direction plus an additional subset, two needles per direction, and one bead or shell ornament per world direction. These objects may represent kratophanous trash—the deposition of ritually exhausted yet (in this instance) unbroken items in a context that safely removes them from power. The rapid dumping of refuse atop these objects would have further ensured their safe removal from contact with group residents. It is also possible, given that the objects were not deliberately destroyed, that they are members of a sacrificial offering of whole, ritually significant items—a cache, as it is traditionally defined.

We next consider the possibility that the entire deposit within the pit consists of ceremonial trash. As discussed earlier, Walker (1995) found that many deposits traditionally categorized as caches instead represent the discarding of worn-out or obsolete ritual items. However, the pit contained an assemblage of whole, potentially ritually significant objects, which, because unbroken, probably do not represent ceremonial trash. Moreover, much of the broken material that is found in the pit is typical of household debris, including ceramic sherds, small lithics (primarily flakes and broken tools), broken obsidian blades, and a ceramic spindle whorl. These are not objects that typically follow what Walker called a "singularized pathway" and thus demarcated as items with special significance or power; instead, they are part of normal household assemblages. It therefore seems unlikely that the contents of the pit represent a collection of ceremonial trash.

Examination of ceramic data suggests that the contents of the pit were deposited in a single dumping episode or a series of rapid episodes. Only a few hundred of the more than 6,000 sherds recovered date to time periods earlier than the Late Classic. Furthermore, ceramic cross-fit data indicate that an average of 4% of sherds cross-fit across lots (Kerry Sagebiel, personal communication 2001). These include lots from throughout the pit, indicating that our division of the pit contents into arbitrary lots for excavation does not represent any actual stratification of the deposit. This, in addition to the uniformly compact nature of the fill, suggests that the broken trash represents a homogeneous

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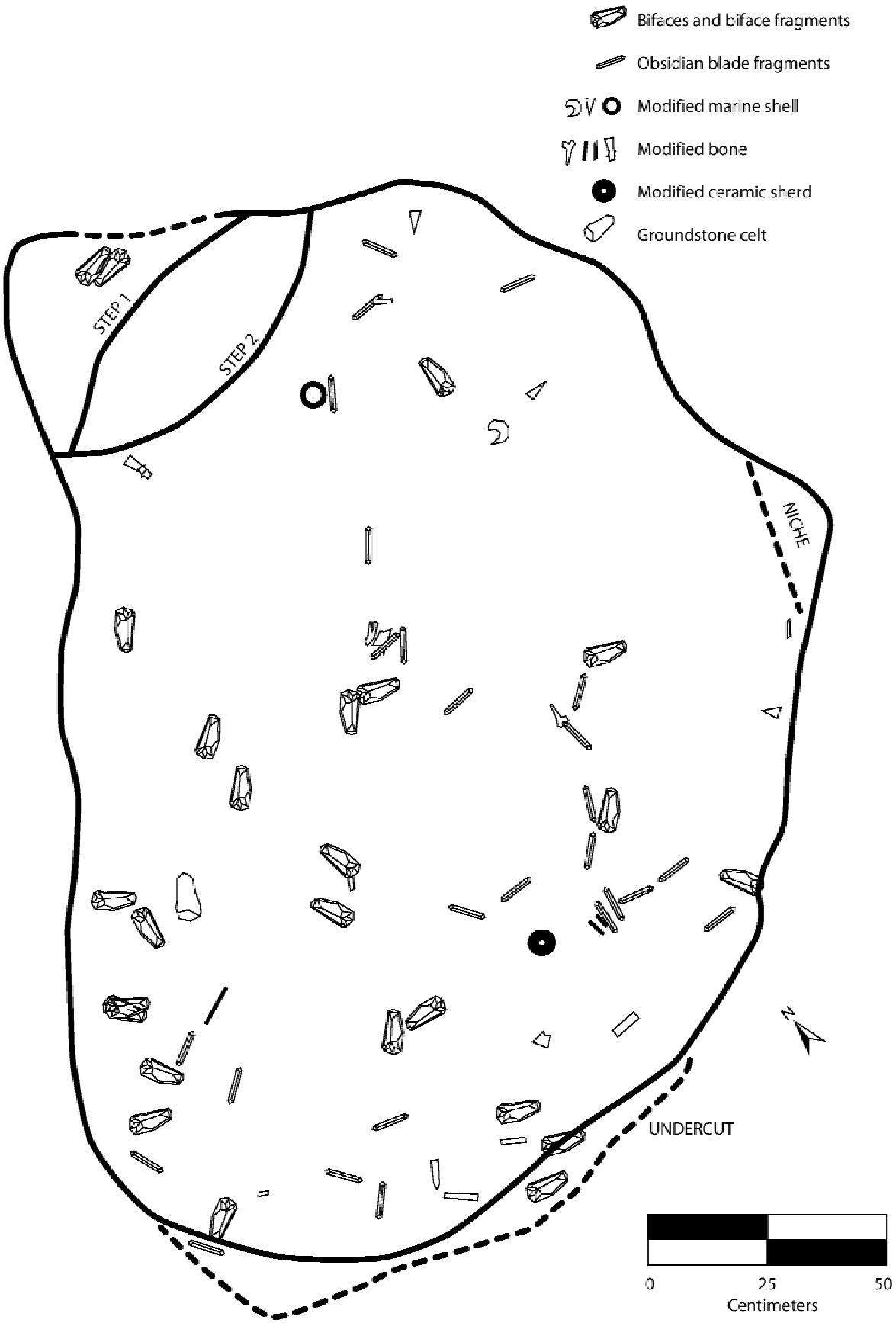


Figure 5. Plan view of bedrock pit illustrating spatial distribution of artifact types in pit fill.

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deposit of secondary household refuse. There is no evidence of a disproportionate number of serving vessels versus cooking vessels that would be suggestive of feasting. Neither are there (with one exception) any *incensario* fragments. These data are also consistent with an interpretation of household trash. Thus, it appears that the whole ritually significant assemblage of bifaces, needles, and shell objects is either a kratophanous deposit or a cache placed within the larger context of a deposit of household garbage.

Container

The unusual configuration of the bedrock pit provides the most compelling evidence for its interpretation as the residue of ritual action. The pit was carved into bedrock that was cleaned of its original soil surface prior to the construction of the structure above it. Garber and his colleagues (1998) view the cleaning and leveling of bedrock prior to construction as an initial ritual action in a sequence of ceremonial events in a non-elite residential context at the site of Blackman Eddy, Belize. The proper preparation of a surface through cleansing is necessary to ensoul and create pivotal places (Freidel et al. 1993). Futhermore, the establishment of a clean, white surface may be related to the act of scattering white marl or laying of marl surfaces in termination rites marking the destruction and subsequent rebirth of structures (Freidel and Schele 1989).

Although many Maya caches are contained within ceramic vessels (Joyce 1992; Krejci and Culbert 1995; Rice 1999), there are instances of cache objects placed in pits or chultuns at sites such as Tikal and Palenque (Joyce 1992; Moholy-Nagy 1997). At Lamanai, Pendergast (1998) recorded frequent discovery of pits that seem to have been prepared as receptacles for ritual offerings but were found empty. Thus, the nature of the container itself is as critical an aspect of its identity as its contents. The most important characteristic of the chamber discussed here is its excavation into bedrock, which gives it metaphorical status as a cave. Caves and other openings into the earth serve as the symbolic maws of creatures such as the jaguar and the earth monster. They are portals into the underworld, entrances into the sacred center of the universe (Gillespie 1993). Moreover, their liminality enables caves to transform everyday objects into sacred ones. If the bedrock pit served as an architectural echo of this belief, then it had the ability to infuse the ordinary refuse deposited within it with sacred significance. This transformative ability may well explain other instances of household or production waste deposited in burial or cache contexts (e.g., Moholy-Nagy 1997). Additional evidence for the sacred status of the bedrock pit comes from its two unusual design features. First, two steps carved out of the bedrock lead down into the bottom of the pit on its north side. Steps have been recorded as leading into pits that have variously been interpreted as cisterns and reservoirs (Paul Hughbanks, personal communication 2001; Weiss-Krecji 2000; Weiss-Krecji and Sabbas 2002). It is possible that this pit served originally as a water-storage feature, as so many similar small depressions did. Although we have no definitive evidence for this function, one can easily envision the white bedrock chamber filled with pure water, steps descending to the mirror-like surface, as a locus of ritual activity. These associations with purity, with caves, and with the underworld undergird the interpretation of the pit as consecrating a sacred space.

The second important architectural feature of the pit is the small niche carved on the eastern side. Niches are recorded in caches and burials at several sites and are found as motifs on stelae and altars. In Olmec art, niches represent the open mouths of jaguars or earth monsters, which serve as entrances to the earth and to the underworld (Gillespie 1993; Grove 1973). The seating of a ruler in the niche places him in the underworld and connects him to the primordial powers of that realm. Alternatively, the positioning of the ruler partway in and partway out of the niche on certain Olmec altars positions him in the cosmic threshold, serving as a powerful connector between the earth and the underworld (Gillespie 1993). The niche stelae at Piedras Negras also feature rulers seated in niches that are reached by ladders marked with footprints. Tatiana Proskouriakoff (1960) interpreted the niche stelae as accession monuments marking the rulers' ascension to the throne. David Stuart (1988) added to this that the niche stelae depict the orderly Maya cosmos—water, earth, and sky—and place the ruler securely within this cosmological framework.

Niches in caches and burials also served a more practical purpose as receptacles for some of the goods included in the offering. At Santa Rita Corozal, Chase (1988) found two effigy censer stands surmounted by paired ceramic plates in a niche cache or termination deposit in Structure 7-3rd. Coe (1959) recorded a niche in each side wall of Burial 5 at Piedras Negras. In Burial 10 at Piedras Negras, one niche contained a circular pile of chert chips, a chert tool, and a tool blank. Another held a tripod dish containing human bones. The floors of all four of the niches were covered with white marl, in what Coe interpreted as a ritual enacted some time after the initial burial. Coe also notes that niches at Copan and Palenque were found empty but may originally have contained perishable objects such as incense. The empty niche in the bedrock pit may be a similar example.

The two most notable architectural features of the pit mark the directions north and east, an important factor in interpreting the significance of the container. In Mesoamerican cosmology, the quadripartite division of the world derives from the cycles of the sun, moon, and planets. Thus, east, west, north, and south mark not the cardinal directions per se, but the path of the sun in its daily journey across the sky. Ritual circuits mimic this journey, marking east as the direction of the sunrise, north as the position of the sun's zenith, west as the direction of the sunset, and south as the position of the sun's nadir (Ashmore 1991, 1992; Bricker 1983; Coggins 1980; Gossen 1974). As Clemency Coggins (1975, 1980, 1982, 1988) explained, east is an honored direction associated with the daily rising and rebirth of the sun. North is associated with the zenith, the pinnacle of the sun's daily passage. In summarizing the solar cosmological model of the Maya, Coggins noted that the directionality it produces "is basic to all Maya ritual and is involved regularly in prayers and invocations" (1988:67).

East and north are the most important of the directions marked in ritual. These directions are the first two marked by the erection of trees during the creation of the world, according to Yucatec Maya beliefs (Gillespie 2000). They are associated with heat, with light, with maleness, with ritual potency, and with the right hand (Coggins 1980; Tate 1992). They connect the daily birth, death, and rebirth of the sun with the birth and death of humans and their rebirth as ancestors. The connection then extends to the construction, destruction, and reconstruction of buildings, which once ensouled through dedication offerings pass through metaphorical stages of life, death, and rebirth. Thus, by marking north and east in ritual deposits, the aspects of this cyclical passage that are emphasized are birth and rebirth. The same concept of symbolic directionality applies to the location and orientation of burials in

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relation to site architecture. Coggins notes that tombs located on the north or east sides of plazas contained either male rulers or lineage heads. The association of at least two male burials with Structure 3-F-10, the eastern structure of the patio group to which it belongs, suggests that these may be the remains of prominent members of the resident household.

The construction of the bedrock pit under the eastern building of Group F's patio 1, the interment of three bodies in this building, and the marking of east and north through architectural features in the pit itself support the interpretation that the deposits under study resulted in the creation of a column of sacred space. This space was visited in a series of ritual actions invoking the concepts of birth, consecration, termination, and rebirth of the ritual pathway.

DISCUSSION

Having assessed the ritual significance of the location, contents, and design of the bedrock pit, we are now in a position to offer a reconstruction of the behaviors responsible for its formation. The inauguration of ritual began with the scraping of the original soil surface off the bedrock and the preparation of a clean, unblemished surface. Next, an oval pit was dug to a depth of 1 m into the bedrock. Whether this pit served as a repository for water or as a storage pit, or witnessed ritual actions involving objects that leave no archaeological trace, is unknown. That the pit was designed with ritual purpose in mind, however, is suggested by the marking of north and east by steps and a niche. At some later time, the pit ceased to be used for its original purpose. The cessation of use may have been marked by placement into the pit of a set of whole, ritually significant yet potentially dangerous objects as either a kratophanous deposit or a sacrificial offering (votive cache). Residents then sought to fill the pit quickly by dumping loads of household refuse into the feature, filling the entire depression. They then capped this deposit with a layer of boulders that sealed the pit. After the pit was sealed, a platform was constructed over the feature. The platform was then rebuilt into a masonry structure, which was renovated several times and resurfaced with new plaster floors. Sometime between the laying of the second and third floors, the column of sacred space initially activated by the pit was reactivated, utilizing the social memory of the pit's location. On two separate occasions, holes were cut into the second floor for the burial of two adult individuals. One of these holes was later reused for the burial of a third individual that intruded on the remains of the first. Construction of a step or terrace west of the structure also referenced the bedrock pit through the placement of two intact chert bifaces under the stones of the step and over the pit (see Figure 3). Continued ritual practices at the locus of the pit and the burials are consistent with current interpretations of the active role of ancestors in the lives of the living, and of the house as a physical manifestation of continuity with the past, made sacred by the inclusion within it of venerated burials (Gillespie 2001; McAnany et al. 1999). Following the burials, the floor was patched and continued to be used as a living surface until the next resurfacing episode. Finally, the entire structure was filled with rubble, serving as a tall platform, before final abandonment during the Late/Terminal Classic period.

CONCLUSIONS

Reconstructed in this manner, the sequence of ritual actions responsible for the establishment and maintenance of the pathway of sacred space initiated by the bedrock pit clearly cannot be neatly accommodated within traditional notions of burials and caches. For instance, the cleansing of the bedrock surface might be interpreted as an act of dedication, serving to purify the ritual locus. It might also be seen as destructive, terminating links with previous occupation. Excavation into bedrock can be viewed as either an act of violence or of impregnation. The deposition of household trash within the pit is likely to be interpreted as lacking in ritual significance. However, as Moholy-Nagy (1997) suggests, there is no reason that pragmatism in disposal practices is necessarily incompatible with ritual in special contexts. And, as noted by Blomster (1998), the rapid dumping of refuse can act as a termination deposit marking the cessation of ritual activity in a particular locus. Likewise, the placement of boulders or blocks, which normally would be seen as an unproblematic phase of construction, here takes on the additional role of sealing the pit, thus segregating its ritual potency and potential danger from the structure above. If sealing dangerous objects in was a goal, then the ritual items in the pit were kratophanous but were deposited whole rather than intentionally destroyed. The column of sacred space engendered by this hybrid deposit, physically hidden within a residential structure but retained within social memory, was reactivated by the dedicatory burial of three individuals, albeit without formal graves or elaborate grave goods. Finally, the bedrock pit is also commemorated through the caching (hiding) of two ordinary bifaces under stones during renovation of the building.

The interpretations offered here draw their strength not simply from analysis of the contents of the potential ritual deposits or of their supernatural symbolism, because many of the materials are ordinary household items and construction materials. Neither do they rely entirely on the context of the deposits in question, as the materials were deposited before, during, and after construction phases of the structure in question. Neither, however, does the container alone provide an answer, because pits may be used for storage, water catchment, trash disposal, offerings, or a combination of these activities at the same time or in sequence. Rather than attempt to assign classificatory terms such as votive offering, termination ritual, or problematical deposit to these residues, it is more productive to assess the sacred status of the bedrock pit and its associated deposits from a behavioral perspective, emphasizing the series of ritual actions that conjoined in the sacralization of this column of space.

This paper also emphasizes that ritual deposits replete with cosmological symbolism and layered meanings are found in residential architecture as well as in public spaces, and that ritual behaviors were practiced by residents of ordinary household groups as well as by the royal occupants of monumental structures. As Patricia McAnany (1995:66) writes, "[A]rchaeologically defined stratigraphic sequences of burial interment, structural renovation, and special dedicatory deposits are ultimately genealogical sequences." The built environment of residences, and the sacred spaces defined within them, embody the relationships between people and gods and among the living, the deceased, and more distant ancestors. Within this sacred geography, Maya elites and commoners alike enacted rituals of birth, death, and rebirth in which the cyclical relationship between the natural world and the constructed world, the ordinary and the supernatural, the beginning and the end was emphasized, and hard lines of division between the mundane and the sacred were erased.

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RESUMEN

En este artículo analizamos la posición central del comportamiento ante los escondrijos en los antiguos rituales mayas. Examinamos los términos de clasificación tradicionales de escondrijo y entierro y sostenemos que en lugar de formar categorías mutuamente excluyentes, estos depósitos especiales son parte de una secuencia y no siempre pueden desacoplarse. Más aún, la divergencia de ciertos hallazgos hacia una tercera categoría, depósitos problemáticos, disfraza el papel interpretado por el rechazo del grupo familiar en contextos rituales. Después de analizar los conceptos entrelazados de dedicación y conclusión, la cosmología de los escondrijos y sus vínculos con la topografía sagrada de las cuevas, planteamos la creciente evidencia de que no todos los depósitos clasificados por los investigadores como escondrijos son ofrendas. Describimos la investigación de un pozo excavado en roca caliza debajo de una estructura residencial en la localidad de La Caldera, en el noroeste de Belice e interpretamos este razgo y sus depósitos relacionados en términos de ubicación, contenido y forma. Ofrecemos una interpretación de la importancia del ritual en el pozo en roca caliza basada en una serie de comportamientos útiles para activar, concluir y reactivar el camino del ritual definido, y sostenemos que el razgo inauguraba una columna de espacio sagrado sustentada por una multiplicidad de acciones a través del tiempo. Finalmente, sugerimos que esta metodología conductista para depósitos especiales es más apremiante que los intentos por clasificar los indicios de materiales de las acciones de rituales individuales de acuerdo con términos estrechamente definidos.

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