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SPECIAL SECTION: PROBLEMATIC "ON-FLOOR" DEPOSITS IN THE TERMINAL CLASSIC EASTERN MAYA LOWLANDS: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE MAYA COLLAPSE

INTRODUCTION

In this issue, we offer a Special Section on problematical and on-floor deposits in Classic Maya sites in Belize coordinated by James J. Aimers, Julie A. Hoggarth, Jaime J. Awe, and Arlen F. Chase. Ten articles by several authors flesh out this topic and offer an in-depth exploration that is sure to be of use to Mesoamerican archaeologists and archaeologists in general. Anyone who has excavated structures—from the smallest to the largest, plazas, or extramural areas—will have encountered such deposits that can test our acumen. The term "problematical deposit" (PD; those working in Belize are partial to the term "problematic deposit," and use it throughout this Special Section) was coined during the Tikal Project in the 1960s to account for a deposit that was neither a cache nor a burial but was produced by some other behavior (see the article by Moholy-Nagy (2020) in this issue for an update). This term is relative, for the issue resides in the archaeological interpretation of the deposit, not in the behaviors that produced it. Many of the PDs occur on floors, and this Special Section emphasizes how we can better interpret on-floor deposits. Numerous examples highlight the heterogeneity of remains, and advance our understanding of ancient behaviors and transformation processes that produced these vexing PDs.

James J. Aimers, **Julie A. Hoggarth**, and **Jaime J. Awe** provide a solid introductory article to this Special Section that reviews the history of PDs. They rightly caution that such deposits are variable in nature, found in numerous locations, and are not restricted to abandonment processes of Classic Maya centers, all of which lend utility to the intentionally vague designation of "problematical." A typology of these deposits is offered by the authors, who base the categories on material correlates, including artifacts, soil matrix, and other attributes. An in-depth accounting of context is critical for interpretation. The classifications (*de facto* refuse, squatter's deposits, dedication/consecration deposits, three types of termination deposits, feasting deposits, and pilgrimage deposits) accentuate a wide range of behaviors, some of which are exemplified by case studies in subsequent articles.

Arlen F. Chase and **Diane Z. Chase** discuss the on-floor (or on-stair) deposit for remains at Caracol, Belize. Their excavations since 1985 at this site have produced a plethora of different contexts in the ancient city's epicenter and residential groups. The variability from structure to structure in on-floor deposits defies easy categorization, though two main types were determined: (1) whole vessels found in situ on floors and (2) sheet refuse. The Chases caution, however, that enumerating contents does not elucidate behaviors responsible for them. The interpretation of the rapid abandonment of this city is greatly strengthened by examining the nature of these deposits, and interestingly, despite material differences in expression, nearly all are accompanied by human bone. The final moments of Caracol indeed may have been violent.

Another example of abandonment-related deposits comes from Chan Chich in Western Belize. **Brett A. Houk** furnishes an in-depth analysis of four PDs whose composition and context differ from each other, yet all emanate from near the city center in elite residential groups. The emphasis is on determination of the processes that produced the deposits, not simply around the time of abandonment but as part of the abandonment process. Artifact scatters contrast with artifactual materials that were piled together. Richness measures further tease out information that is critical to comparisons. The utility of detailing the contents and context of PDs allows other researchers to compare their own datasets to this one.

To demonstrate the utility of their behavioral-contextual method for elucidating PDs, **Maxime Lamoureux-St-Hilaire** and **Andrew Kent Snetsinger** refer to the archaeological remains of a palace at La Corona, Guatemala, and an agricultural household group from the outskirts of Mininha, Belize, noting that such deposits occur at all scales of architecture. Recommending that Mayanists abandon the PD concept and work toward a common interpretive framework and terminology, their first order of business is to operationalize definitions. The incorporation of formation processes, following Schiffer's (1987) behavioral approach, results in five behavioral-contextual categories. Using this framework, the gradual and organized abandonment of La Corona's palace compares with that of Group MRS15 at Minanha. The authors assert that the replicability of their method goes far in helping to resolve PDs.

In the fifth article in this section, **Jaime J. Awe, Christophe Helmke, James J. Aimers, Claire E. Ebert, W. James Stemp**, and **Julie A. Hoggarth** broaden the discussion on PDs through the incorporation of ethnohistoric and ethnographic approaches with archaeology. By focusing on peri-abandonment processes at numerous Maya sites of different scales, they dispel concerns of interpreting PDs through microstratigraphic excavation and regional comparisons. Furthermore, material remains from pilgrimages have been documented in ethnographies that are of great utility in interpreting the archaeological record. The application of several approaches supplies a strong interpretation of ancient behaviors.

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Some of the PDs may be the result of feasts, trash accumulation (i.e., middens), or activities in which the inclusion of animals was a critical element, such as particular rituals. **Chrissina C. Burke, Katie K. Tappan, Gavin B. Wisner, Julie A. Hoggarth,** and **Jaime J. Awe** evaluate the faunal component of peri-abandonment deposits from Baking Pot and Xunantunich, Belize by assessing anatomical, taxonomic, and formation process aspects of bone and shell. Achieving a better understanding of the variation in faunal materials from deposit to deposit, in concert with artifactual analyses, broadens interpretations. The authors advocate enhancing our explanations of deposits through thorough faunal analysis, especially given the symbolic significance of numerous species to the ancient Maya.

Another case study from Baking Pot, Belize comes from **Julie A. Hoggarth, J. Britt Davis, Jaime J. Awe,** and **Christophe Helmke** in the seventh article of this series. They illustrate the utility of determining whether and how some PDs were formed from peri-abandonment activities. The fortuitous recovery of pottery with glyphs (including the well-known Komkom vase) assists in supplying calendar dates that inform us about the collapse at Baking Pot. The unique patterns of these peri-abandonment deposits lead the authors to caution us that deposits at other ancient Maya cities may not have the same characteristics as those at Baking Pot. This observation underlies the fact that Mayanists are now truly beginning to grapple with PDs and the underlying behaviors that produced them.

At Cahal Pech, in the Belize Valley, researchers **James J. Aimers** and **Jaime J. Awe** deconstruct PDs that typically have been interpreted as *de facto* refuse or remains due to rapid abandonment. Contexts (tomb, burial, or plaza) contain pottery vessels, stone tools, spindle whorls, figurines, ceramic flutes, and jade beads, indicating the placement of diverse cultural materials by ancient inhabitants. Several lines of evidence point to these PDs as the result of pilgrimages by Terminal Classic peoples who lingered in the region after the core of the city had been abandoned, leading the authors to conclude that the collapse at this locale was a protracted affair rather than a sudden event.

We learn more about the ancient practices and PDs at Cahal Pech from **W. James Stemp** and **Jaime J. Awe**, who discuss the provocative finds of chert bifaces that were deposited in front of elite architecture in the circumscribed Plaza A. Fifteen of the 16 points (most likely attached to darts) are complete and all exhibit usewear common to projectiles. The intentional deposition most likely relates to activities other than warfare since evidence for such conflict is lacking at Cahal Pech. The deliberate selection of these materials hints at underlying symbolism, especially since their distribution falls into one deposit of nine points and another of seven. Lying above the plastered floor of the plaza, these projectiles may have been part of peri-abandonment rituals witnessed at other communities in Belize during the Terminal Classic.

The final article in this Special Section summarizes numerous PDs recovered at Cahal Pech which are compared with similar deposits at other Western Belize sites. **Jaime J. Awe, Claire E. Ebert, Julie A. Hoggarth, James J. Aimers, John Douglas, Christophe Helmke,** and **W. James Stemp** emphasize the excellent contextual data at this site—over 80 percent of its core has been excavated—and stress the significance of considering contemporaneous activities, all of which enable them to better comprehend underlying behaviors. Based on their robust methodology, they reject previous interpretations for PDs. The authors propose two scenarios for the last hurrah at Cahal Pech, a community that eventually faced demise along with other Classic Maya sites.

The resolution of PDs benefits from both traditional and advanced excavation methods, comparative frameworks, use of the ethnohistoric and ethnographic record, and teamwork that brings together diverse viewpoints and expertise. The authors of this Special Section utilize new data along with old and new ideas, along with longstanding ones, for their insights. The utility of this Special Section lies in the numerous practical applications that advance our understanding of how the ancient Maya abandoned their centers during the Terminal Classic in the area we now call Belize.

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