

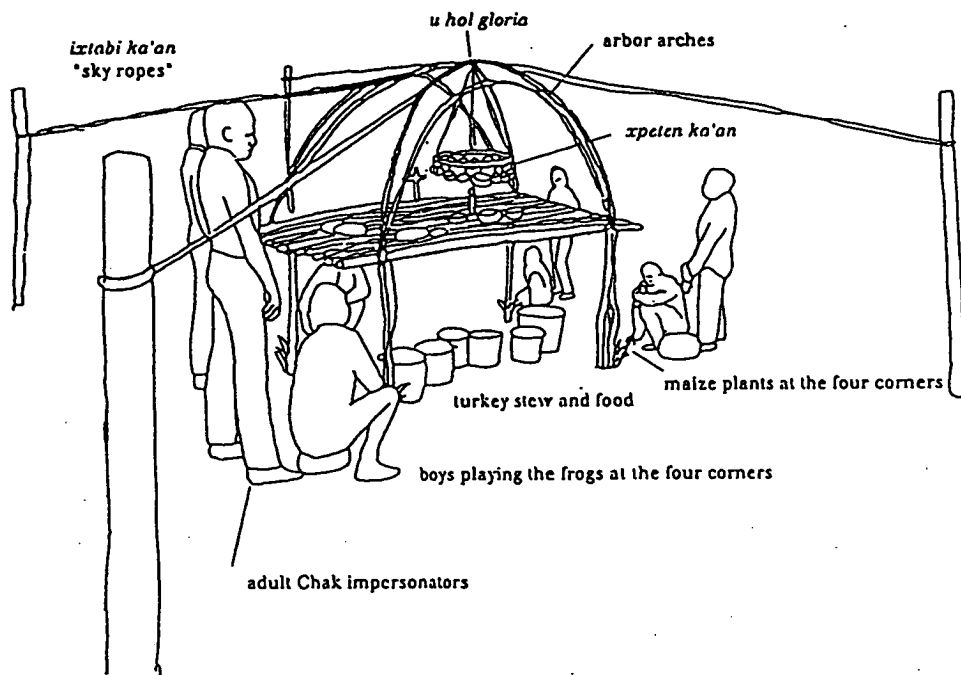
NORTHERN MAYA ARCHITECTURE, RITUAL, AND COSMOLOGY

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INTRODUCTION

Central to many of the field rituals performed by the *h'men'ob* of the northern lowlands is the mesa or altar, a scaffold platform built of saplings and lashed with vines, all freshly cut especially for the occasion (Fig. 1). The Maya call this altar *ka'an che'*, literally sky tree and figuratively an elevated garden. During its use this altar holds the portal between the center of the earth and the center of the heavens (Freidel, Schele and Parker 1993:51). Sacred breads, prepared in an underground oven on fire-heated rocks, a *pib*, make the journey from raw to cooked, from food to offering, by going into the clefted earth and then up into the sky on the altar. We think that in ceremonies using the *ka'an che'* and the *pib*, such as the rain-bringing *Cha'-Chak*, the Yucatec Maya today express the kind of time honored beliefs and ritual practices which framed the ideology of royal accession in the Precolumbian north. Art, texts, and architectural designs show that Classic period Southern lowland kings also used the *pibnail*, the interior or underground sanctuary, and also the sky scaffold-altar in their accession ceremonies (Freidel and Suhler n.d.). This general practice was probably pan-Maya.

Indeed, a journey from a scaffold-like forest of poles, into the earth, and then back into the world of the living accompanied a highland Maya accession in 1543 (Coe 1989:161-162). This Q'eqchi' performance, witnessed by friars, commemorated the Christian conversion and legitimation of a lord named Ah Pop'o Batz. In the pageant, the Ancestral Hero Twins defeated the death lords by burning themselves and their adversaries up in a fire of brush surrounded by large quantities of copal incense smoke and then returning to the world unscathed. This performance of a Creation myth story occurred in a space which allowed for the disappearance and safe reemergence of the actors. As described, the pageant took place on a platform covered with artificial trees and a hidden exit. This



The candle in the center of the table represents the *itz* of heaven with the *itz* of its wax; the hanging with thirteen gourds represents the hole (*hol*) in the sky; the cross at the rear of the table is the *santo*.

FIG. 1.—Cha' Chak Altar at Yaxuna, from Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993: 56 Fig. 1-11.

hidden exit, presumably a trap door, allowed the actors playing the Hero Twins to set fire to the artificial forest, disappear below the platform, and ascend back into the upper world in glory after killing the Xibalbans.

While this aboriginal ritual shows conceptual parallels with contemporary Maya rites like the *Cha'-Chak*, it also illustrates some architectural features that we have found in buildings dating from the beginning of Maya civilization. We propose, following in the footsteps of Claude Baudez at Copan (1991) and Palenque (1996) that these buildings were also used for performance of such pageants.

DANCE PLATFORMS AT YAXUNA

At the site of Yaxuna, in the middle of the Yucatan Peninsula 20 km south of Chichen Itza, excavation by the Selz Foundation Yaxuna Archaeological Project

has documented two of these building types with construction dating to the Late Preclassic (Freidel, Suhler and Cobos 1992; Suhler and Freidel 1993) (Fig. 2). Prior to their excavation each of these buildings appeared as nondescript, 3 m high, 15-17 m diameter, mounds with no architectural features visible on the surface. Excavation revealed each of these buildings to have been terraced platforms pierced by interior serpentine corridors, a central sanctum, and featuring an interior staircase leading from a corridor to a flat-topped summit, logically by means of a trap door entrance (Fig. 3).

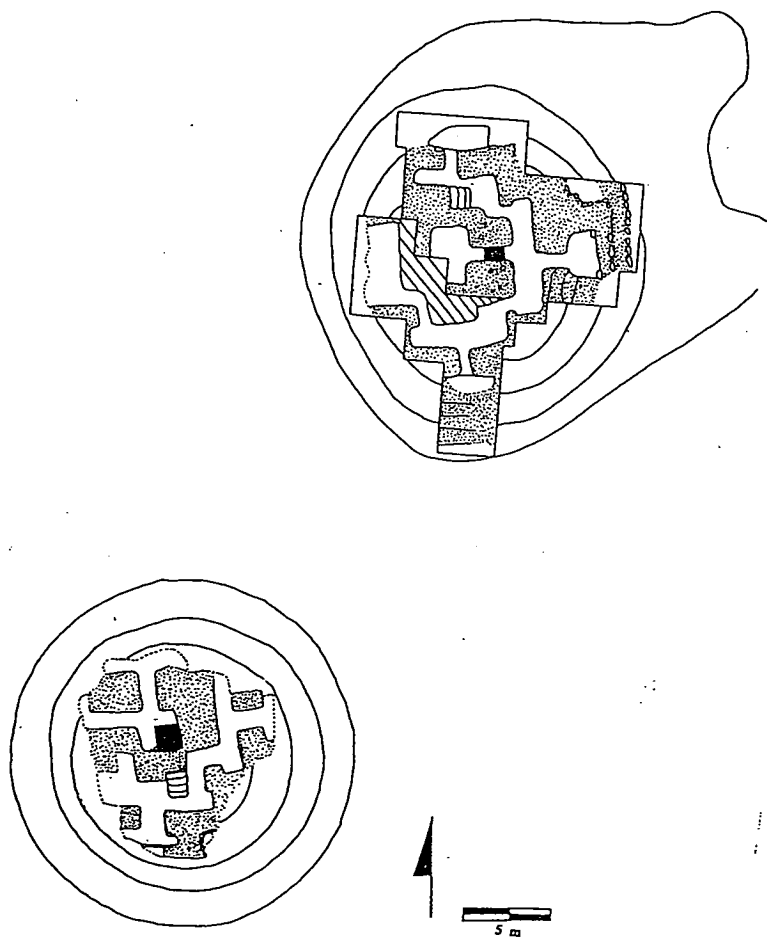


FIG. 2.—Relationship between Structures 6E-53 and 6E-120 at Yaxuna.

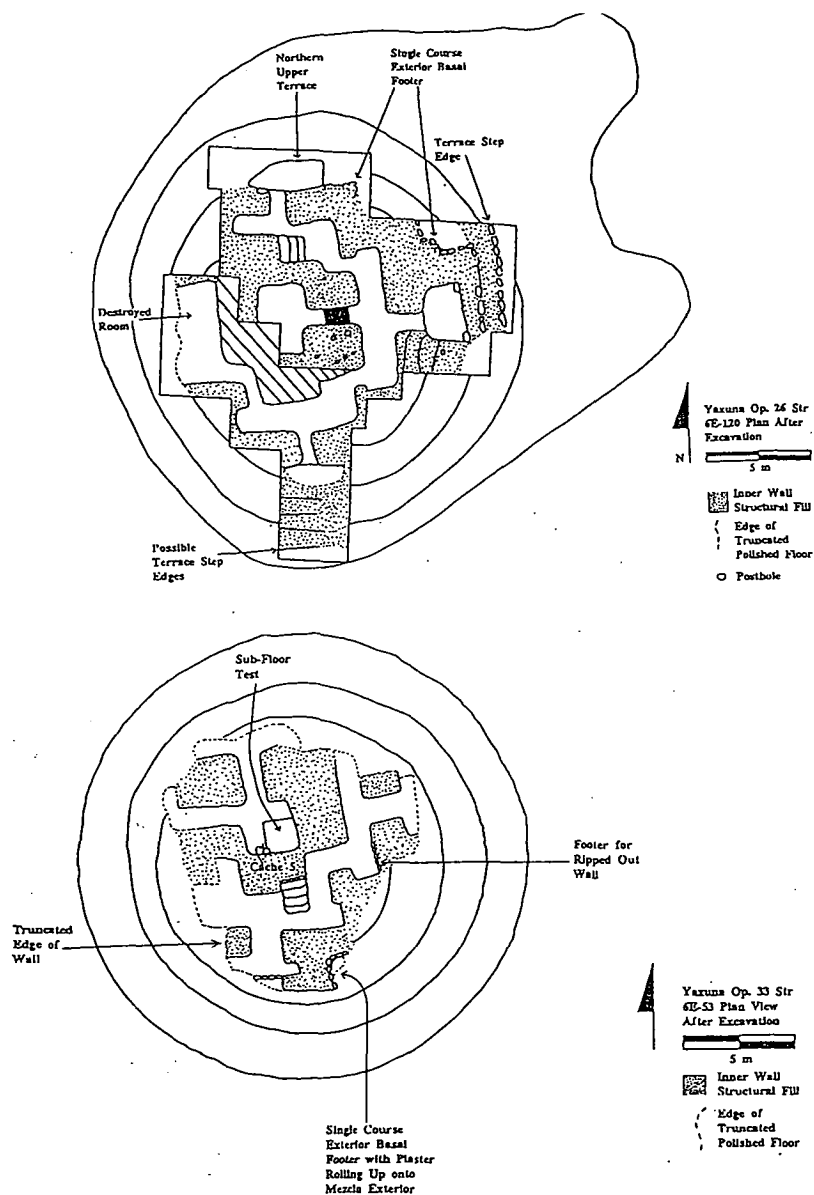


FIG. 3.—Plan views of Structures 6E-53 and 6E-120, the «Dance Platforms» at Yaxuna.

Debris from the carefully and reverentially destroyed roofs piled into the corridors suggest beam and mortar construction. The central portion of the summits of these buildings contained patterns of post holes. Their exteriors were made with what Proskouriakoff (1946) referred to as sculptured surfaces typical of Late Preclassic Maya practice. That is to say, rather than fashioning sharply vertical exterior walls of stone with thin plaster over them, laborers made a series of sloped, thickly plastered terraces with soft edges. The results were low, squat «mountains» with high enough basal terraces so that they could only be ascended, with any dignity, from the interior stairways.

In plan view, the undulating corridors inside each platform defined a quatrefoil. As used by Classic Maya, this was the shape of the *ol*, a word that means hearth or portal and which refers to the portal connecting the world of the living to the world of the ancestors and gods. The quatrefoil also marked the birthplace of First Father on the back of the celestial turtle. First Father was the Maize God (Taube 1985), resurrected from his own skull at the beginning of this creation (Freidel, Schele and Parker 1993:215). The sanctum at the middle of the Yaxuna plans marked a concrete expression of the «underground house». By analogy with later Classic practice this was a place of transformation from death through birth back into life.

The sanctuaries in the temples of the Cross Group at Palenque, where king Kan-Balam celebrated his accession, were named both *pibnail*, «underground» houses, and *kunul*, «magic houses» (Freidel, Schele and Parker 1993:22). The Palenque buildings embodied the Maya place of resurrection after sacrifice and furnished a way for the ruler to negotiate the cosmological path of First Father (Freidel, Schele and Parker 1993:283-4). We think that, by analogy, the Yaxuna buildings functioned similarly.

At Yaxuna, within the subterranean corridors which represented the underworld were a set of rounded and plastered steps, their tops heavily worn and marked with repeated patchings, due to use. We hypothesize these steps led to an open summit, itself eventually stripped of plaster and collapsed into the corridors, probably sometime around 550-600 A.D. This summit exterior symbolized, in contrast to the passages and chamber below, the surface of the world, analogous to the forested surface described by Coe on the sixteenth century platform in the highlands.

As already mentioned, this architecturally rendered surface of the world was pierced by several postholes. We believe that together these postholes held the legs of a wooden scaffold, representing the pinnacle of the path: a throne in the sky and heavens. When in this location the king had completed the path and was seated in majesty in the heavens. Information about the pervasiveness, significance, and multiple uses for scaffolds in Maya ritual are well documented (Taube 1988) and archaeological examples of such activity in the context of accession and rule can be literally found in the accession stelae of Piedras Negras

and in a more metaphorical fashion on the facade of the east wing of the Monjas at Chichen Itza.

A cache under the floor of the sanctum in the southern platform at Yaxuna contained materials further supporting our hypothesis that it functioned in accession rituals drawing on the creation story (Fig. 4). We found at the bottom of a typical Late Preclassic cache 'bucket' a dense 3 cm deposit of organic material, perhaps the remains of bark cloth used to bundle. Within this decayed organic layer were a small greenstone axe nestled into a mirror of the same stone. Each of these are symbols for gods associated with the institution of kingship in the Maya lowlands.

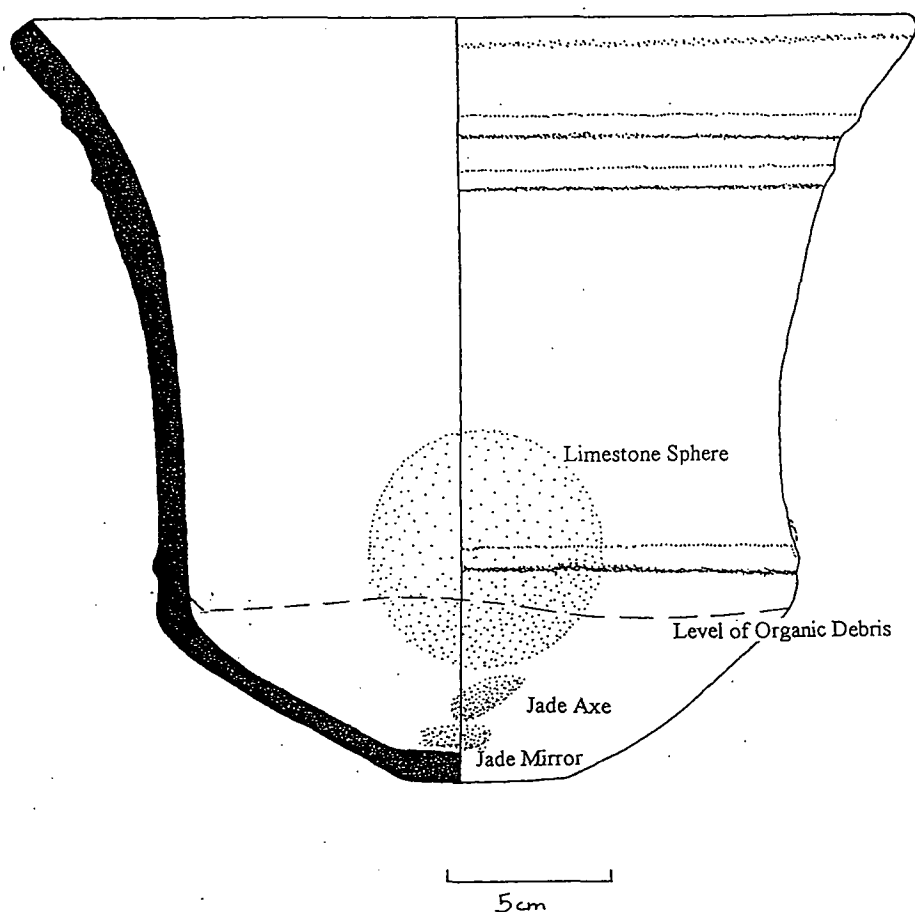


FIG. 4.—Cutaway Detail of «Cache Bucket» from Structure 6E-53, Yaxuna.

The axe is an insignia of *Chak*, and *Chakob* cracked open the turtle shell with their lightning stones to release First Father (Freidel, Schele and Parker 1993:93). The axe marks the forehead of *K'awil*, a god of kings and high nobility (Freidel, Schele and Parker 1993:200-202).

The mirror marks gods in general, and *Sak-Hunal*, the White Oneness divinity of kingship in particular. Set on top of the organic material was a white limestone sphere, 10 cm in diameter. In a recent presentation at Dumbarton Oaks, Karl Taube (1994) argued persuasively that such stone spheres represent symbolic hearthstones that comprised the First Three Stone Place of creation. This is another manifestation of the birthplace of First Father.

At Yaxuna we refer to these buildings collectively as the «Dance Platforms» because that is surely one of the activities which took place throughout their various performance areas. We believe the «Dance Platforms» at Yaxuna are some of the earliest manifestations of accession architecture in the Maya north, purposefully designed to allow the ruler to enter the underworld, be reborn on the surface of the earth, and ascend to a seat in the heavens.

STRUCTURE 6F-3 AT YAXUNA

The Maya built further examples of this type of building in the northern Lowlands in the periods following the Late Preclassic. Early in the Early Classic (+/-350 A.D.) masons raised another resurrection and accession building at Yaxuna in the North Acropolis of the site. Similar in functional design to the Preclassic platforms, this particular structure was a pyramid of monumental scale, with the performance areas 5 meters above the ground. Here again we found many of the pertinent architectural features: an entrance directly into the pyramidal mountain, a subsurface sanctum, interior subterranean passages, and an interior staircase providing a trap door exit onto an upper surface, in this case the summit plaza of the pyramid (Fig. 5). To get into the interior passages from the sanctum, one had to use a short ladder to climb into a niche-like opening. A ladder was also required to go from the interior passage into the stairway leading onto the open summit. Ladders were featured in Southern Classic royal scaffold accession scenes, such as those on stelae at Piedras Negras (Taube 1988:fig. 12.12).

Adding the aspect of rulership in the Yaxuna building was the presence of a king's tomb, deep in the center of the structure and within an earlier construction phase (Fig. 6). This tomb was ritually re-entered and then resealed during the construction of the first expression of the resurrection-accession design on this location, thereby truly linking it with an «underground house» occupied by a king. That king was buried with resurrection imagery. He carried three large greenstone beads in his hands over his groin, marking the Three Stone Place. A profile

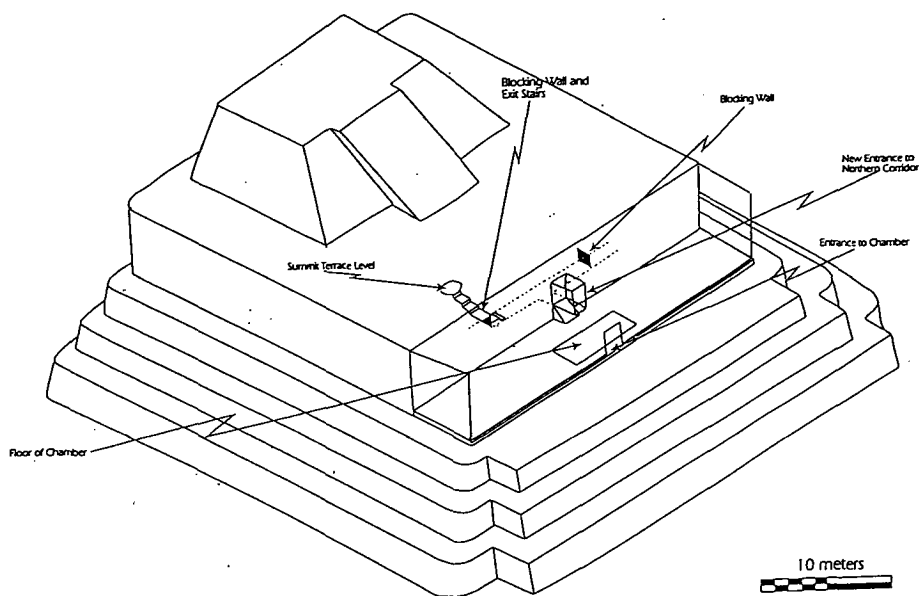


FIG. 5.—Isometric Reconstruction of Structure 6F-3, Yaxuna.

greenstone amulet denoting *itz'at*, creator artist, and a spondylus portrait of a young lord's face lay under these three beads. This young lord has the buck-teeth characteristic of Early Classic expressions of the Maize God as identified by Taube (1983:fig. 10). Three rough and large white stones parallel the body at the head, middle, and feet, with the middle one covered with charred pottery—fire in the Three Stone hearth.

Following the erection of the first resurrection corridors and sanctuary, this building was modified several more times but retained essentially this same design until the end of the Chichen Itza domination of the peninsula, sometime around 1300 A.D.

SATUNSAT AT OXKINTOK

A potential later Early Classic example of this type of structure is the Satunsat at Oxkintok to the north and west of Yaxuna in Yucatan (Rivera 1987, 1989). This building is a more elaborate version containing three stories of subsurface

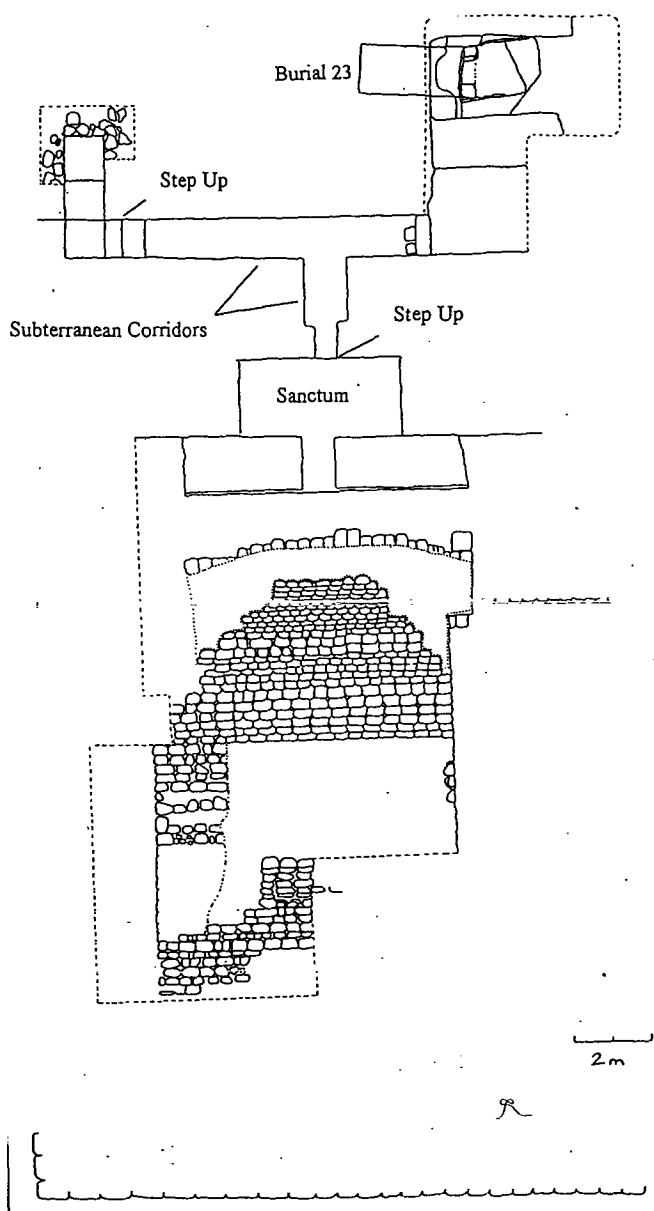


FIG. 6.—Plan of Structure 6F-3, Yaxuna.

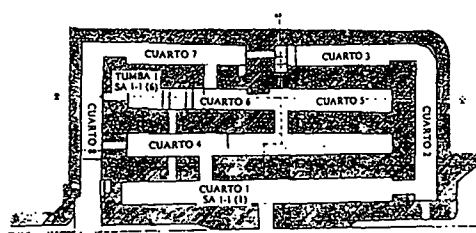
passages and rooms (Fig. 7). The presence of an intrusive royal burial dated to 500 to 600 A.D. suggests the original construction of the building took place at the latest during the Early Classic. Due to the absence of a roof we cannot confirm the existence of an open summit suitable for performance. However, we believe the labyrinthine nature of the building, and the royal burial —identifiable by royal insignia jewelry— are enough to warrant its tentative inclusion in the accession/procession/cosmology category of architecture under discussion. The lengthy use of this building in what was essentially its original form is documented by the presence of Terminal Classic materials in the rooms and on the floors.

STRUCTURE 2 AT AKE

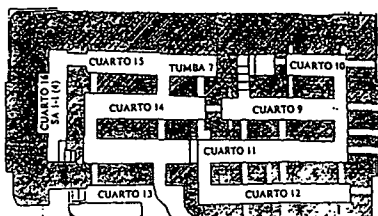
At the site of Ake, there is another building, Structure 2, which contains some of the necessary architectural elements for a resurrection-accession facility and seems, on the basis of masonry and style, to also date to the Early Classic (Roys and Shook 1966). The building is 18 m high with a flat-topped summit. Originally flanking the main staircase there were four outset terrace blocks, presumed to have once carried decorated panels (Fig. 8). Viewed head-on the building looks very much like E-VII-sub at Uaxactun (Ricketson and Ricketson 1937). Located below the surface in the center of the flat-topped summit was a round, vaulted, subterranean chamber (Fig. 9). The archaeologists who investigated this building, Roys and Shook, made mention of the fact that this subterranean sanctum showed evidence of repeated renovation and, therefore, a substantial period of use and reuse. Access is presumed to have been accomplished by removal of the capstone (1966:14-15). We believe this building represents another example of a cosmological accession building. The researchers reported no evidence for a scaffold. However, it should be noted that excavation was required to reveal the postholes on top of E-VII-sub. Therefore, in light of the lack of excavation data at Ake, such a possibility can not be discounted.

STRUCTURE 1-sub AT DZIBILCHALTUN

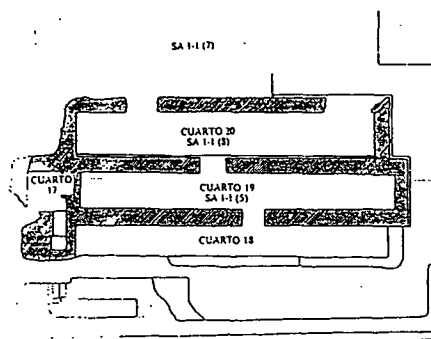
At Late Classic Dzibilchaltun, sometime around 700 A.D., the Maya constructed Structure 1-sub, also known as the Temple of the Seven Dolls for its intrusive Postclassic Period cache (Fig. 10). The superstructure sits on a four sided platform with a staircase on each side and a stair block or shrine at the top of each staircase. The superstructure or temple (Fig. 11) is, in the words of its excavator, E.W. Andrews IV, a «roughly square building containing a continuous vaulted corridor surrounding a small, raised central chamber. The high walls and vaults of this chamber form a low central tower» (Andrews IV and Andrews V 1980:91).



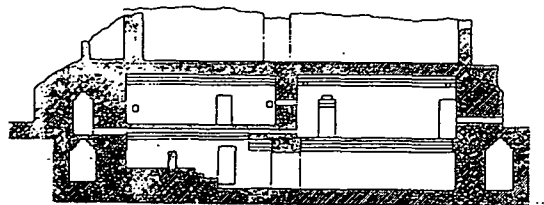
Piso primero de la estructura SA-I (Santunsat). Levantamiento de Alfonso Muñoz Cosme.



Piso segundo de la estructura SA-I (Santunsat). Levantamiento de Alfonso Muñoz Cosme.



Piso tercero de la estructura SA-I (Santunsat). Levantamiento de Alfonso Muñoz Cosme.



Secciones de la estructura SA-I (Santunsat). Levantamiento de Alfonso Muñoz Cosme.

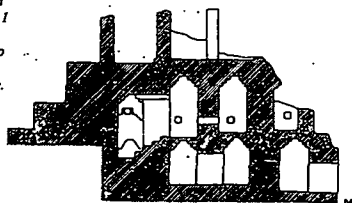


FIG. 7.—Plan of Satunsat, Oxkintok. Adapted from Rivera D.: 1989; Figs. 9-12.

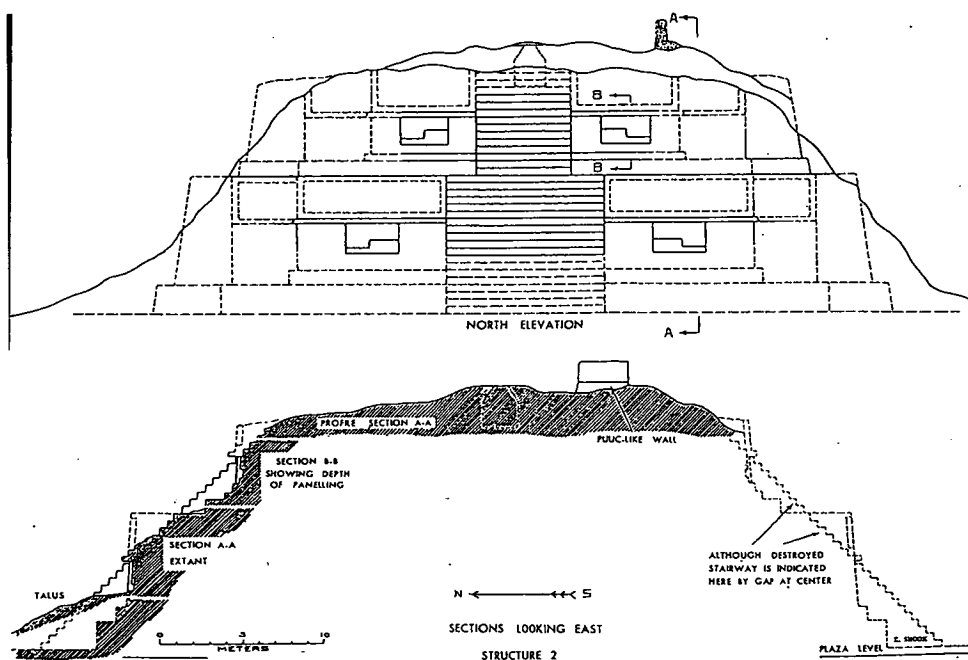


FIG. 8.—N. Elevation and Section, Structure 2, Ake. From Roys and Shook 1066: Fig. 13.

«On the south side of the tower was a single high opening, 75 cm wide, with its base at the level of the corridor roof... The opening may have simply provided illumination or, with a ladder, access to the corridor roof» (Andrews IV and Andrews V 1980:94). We propose that, like the scaffold-effigy roofcombs on many Classic Maya temples, the tower on Str 1-Sub. is a masonry expression of the scaffold-niche area of accession.

In our interpretation this is the architecture of an accession-resurrection building. That the corridor and sanctum are truly meant to be viewed as under the earth is demonstrated by the preserved stucco decoration on the superior molding (Coggins 1983). The imagery on the southern and northern sides is pertains to water and the sea, punctuated by «waterlily monsters». Together, these mark the waters of creation where First Father arose (Freidel, Schele and Parker 1993:283) and the frieze breaks the building up into its three requisite parts.

At the center of the interior space below is the sanctum. This is defined as a *pibnail* by the surrounding corridor. In plan view, Coggins (1983:51) suggests it displays a Kan cross. The kan cross marks the birthplace of First Father at the cen-

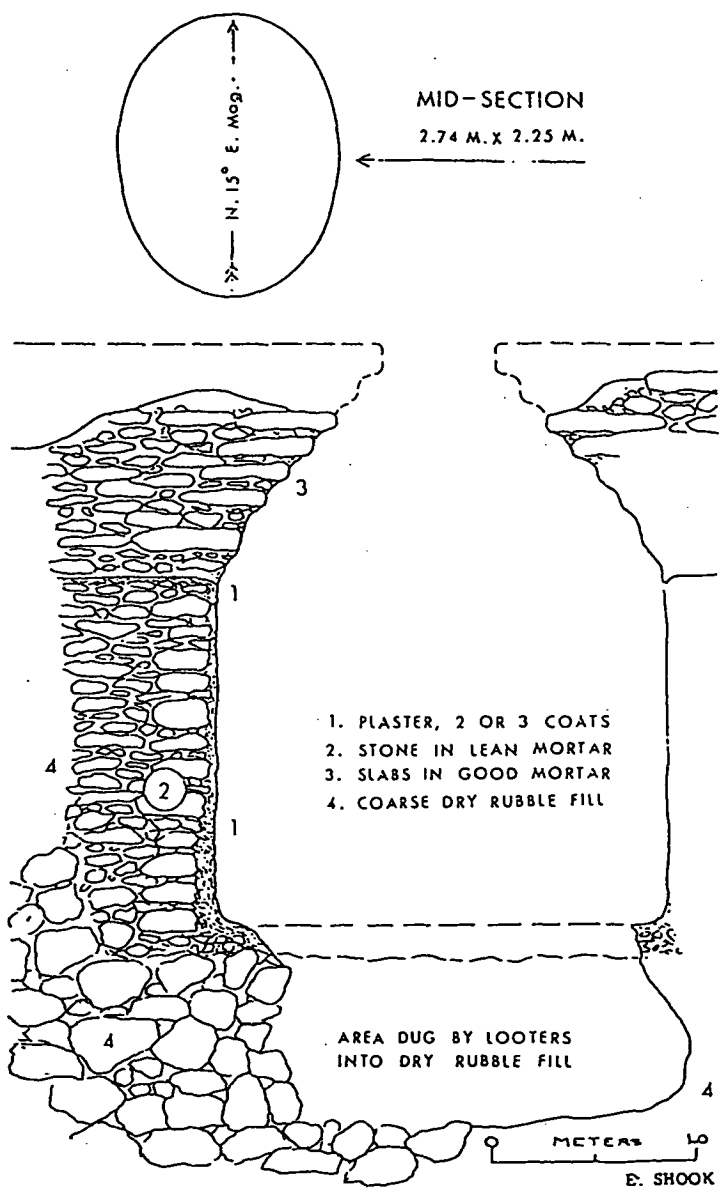


FIG. 9.—Detail of Subterranean Chamber, Structure 2, Ake. From Roys and Shook 1966: Fig. 21.

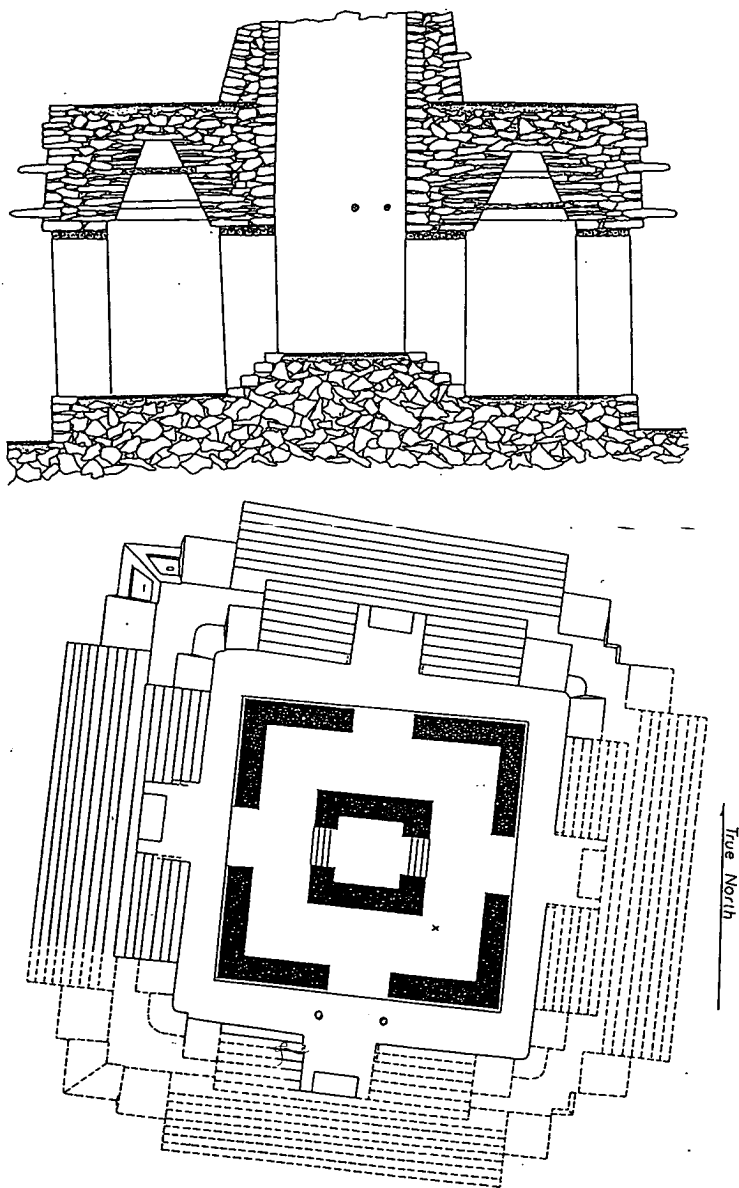


FIG. 10.—Plan and Section of Structure 1 — sub (Temple of the seven Dolls, Dzibilchaltun.
From Coggins 1983: Figs. 6, 34).

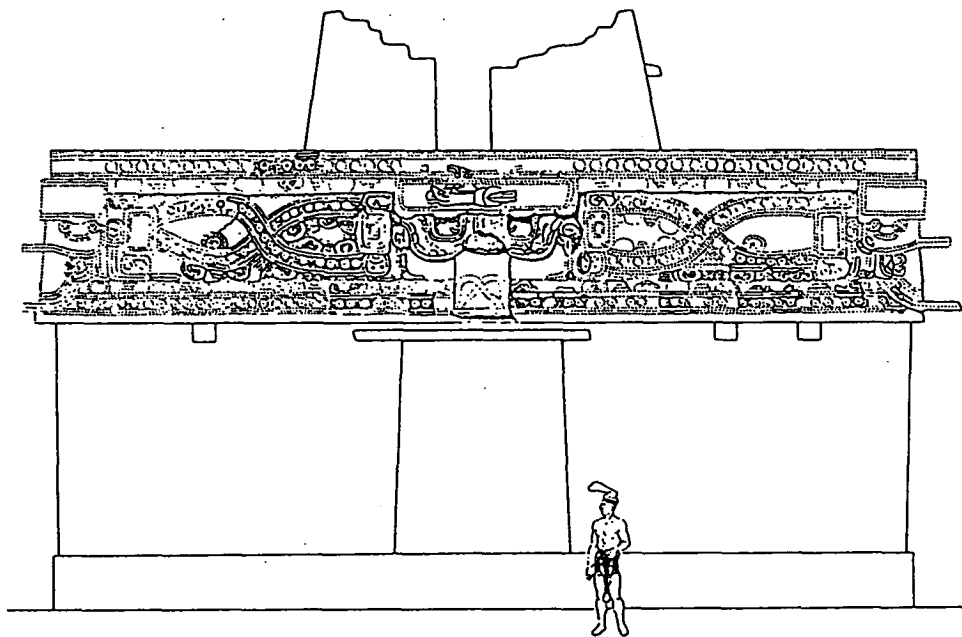


FIG. 11.—South Elevation, Structure 1 — sub, Dzibilchaltun. From Coggins 1983: Fig. 8.

ter of the sky (Freidel, Schele and Parker 1993:103). Above the frieze is a tower in the center of the roof, an extension of the sanctum, with a small doorway on the south side. Inside the sanctum one would rise, with the use of a ladder as at Structure 6F-3 at Yaxuna, out onto the roof, here into the sky above the sea of creation. As Clemency Coggins described it: «Str. 1-Sub may also have resembled the composition in the Temple of the Cross where the tower that represents the world tree rises above its basal water frieze. At Dzibilchaltun, however, the imagery was three-dimensional, and the tower would have represented the great tree of the east, as well perhaps as the central tree within its own Kan Cross shaped microcosm» (Coggins 1983:51).

The general value of Coggins' interpretation is corroborated by the text of the Temple of the Cross, which declares the ascent of First Father into the sky after the appearance of the Three Stone Place (Freidel, Schele and Parker 1993:70). It is worth noting that the Temple of the Cross celebrates the accession of a list of Palenque kings, ending with *Kan-Balam*, the patron.

THE CARACOL AT CHICHEN ITZA

Our final example of resurrection-accession architecture in the northern lowlands is found at Chichen Itza in the form of the Caracol, excavated and consolidated by the Carnegie Institute of Washington in the late 1920's, early 1930's (Ruppert 1935). Although the building was constructed in the round, its essential elements place it within the functional category under consideration. When first built the Caracol was footed on a 3.7 m high, round building platform of the same diameter with no stairs to lead from ground level into the interior (Fig. 12). Once again the use of perishable ladders, scaffolds, or stairs was an integral aspect in the design of this building. In plan (Fig. 13) there is an outer vaulted corridor and an inner vaulted corridor, defining an inner sanctum as seen in the more conventional rectilinear resurrection-accession structures. The investigators found a dedicatory cache which lies at the base of the central pillar, and is therefore central to the entire structure. The cache consisted of two ceramic vessels placed above and in conjunction with a carefully fashioned masonry cleft at the base of the original construction. The cleft, in our view, marks the clefted back of the turtle, the clefted creation mountain, and the *ol* or portal place at the base of this sky journey building. A narrow hollow tube pierces the central pillar directly above this offering, perhaps a psychoduct linking the underworld to the sky. The vessels themselves are Late Classic and date construction to around 700 A.D., contemporary with Str. 1-Sub. at Dzibilchaltun.

The journey from the underworld of the interior passages upward was performed by surmounting a series of stairs which wound around the central pillar; thereby uniting the path out of the inner sanctum with the creation/portal cache beneath the building. From this winding staircase an exit was provided onto the rooftop of the main structure, again signifying the juncture of the world and sky. As at Structure 1-sub at Dzibilchaltun, the ascent into the heavens was most likely accomplished by then ascending the tower which rose above the primary roof level.

As the modern name implies, this building is an effigy of a conch shell. The conch served as an insignia of Quetzalcoatl in his wind aspect, Ehecatl, and there were round temples dedicated to this god throughout Mexico, including later in Tenochtitlan (Pollock 1936). In the legends and histories of Chichen Itza (Landa in Tozzer 1941) Quetzalcoatl-Kulkulkan is the founder of the city. Given the accession function we attribute to the Caracol, we think early kings there may have ascended in the persona of this Mexican hero. At the same time, the Classic Maya have a cosmic conch as well, a place called *K'an Hub Matawil*, precious or birthplace conch. *Matawil* is a supernatural place and title of First Mother and the Hero Twins at Palenque. It may be significant that the historical rulers of Chichen in the ninth century trace descent from a founding woman (Schele and Freidel 1990:fig. 9:14). *K'an Hub Matawil* is certainly part of resurrection imagery, for it

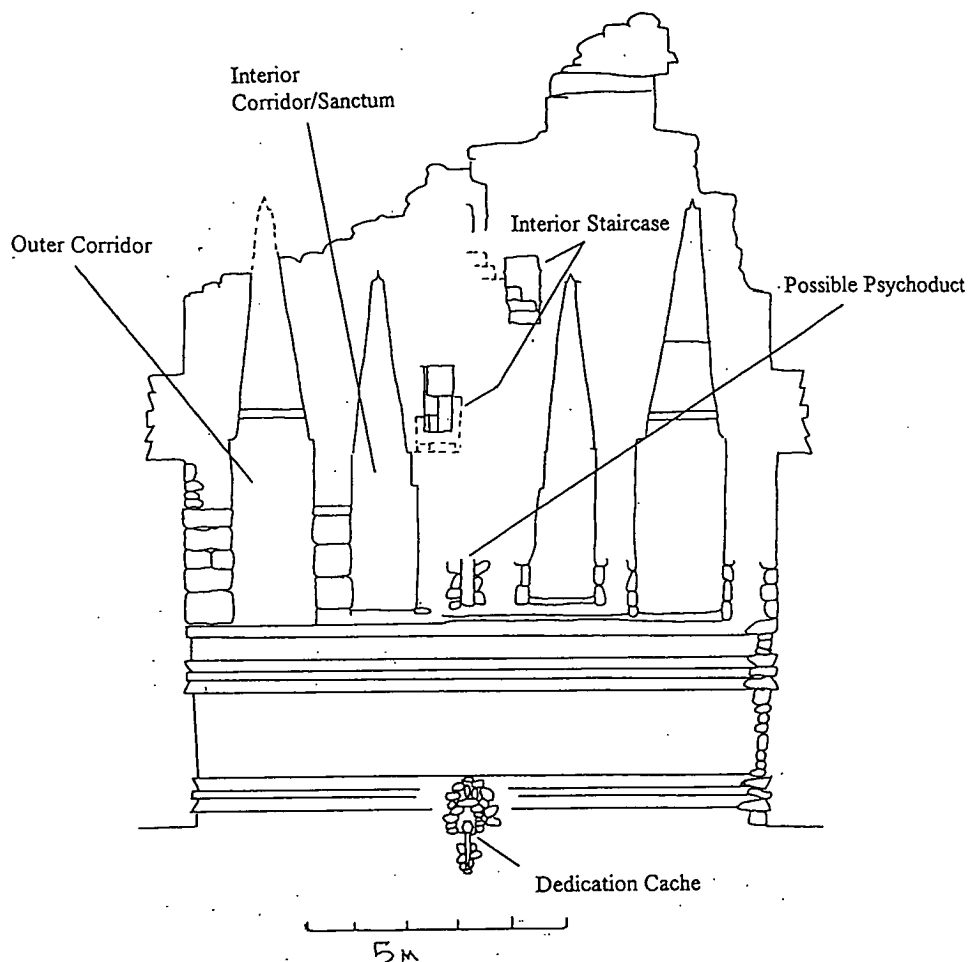


FIG. 12.—Section of Caracol, Chichen Itza. Adapted from Ruppert 1935.

is the shell place that the dead *Pakal* is drawn into as his son *Kan-Balam* is being reborn as the Maize God out of the *ol* cleft in the First True Maize Mountain on the panel of the Foliated Cross. Although coopted and modified subsequent to its initial construction, this building retained its essential form and presumably function until the sacking of Chichen Itza by a Mayapan led confederation sometime between 1200 and 1300 A.D. (Suhler and Freidel 1995).

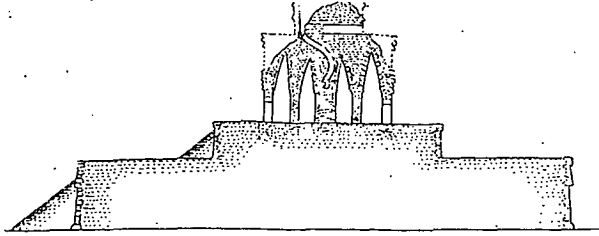


FIG. 33 SECTION OF ROUND TOWER OR CARACOL.
With its terraces and hypothetical profile of upper portion of towers.

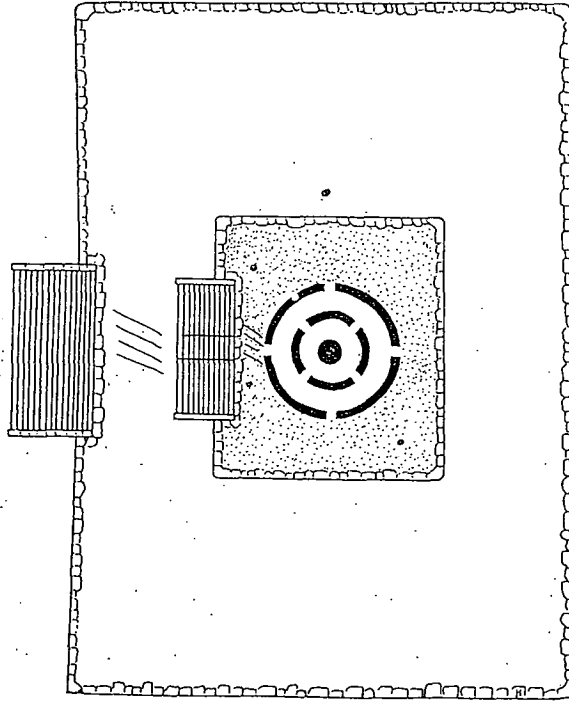


FIG. 13.—Plan of Caracol, From Ruppert 1935: Fig. 7.

CONCLUSION

This cursory review of resurrection-accession buildings is a beginning and restricted to the northern third of the peninsula. We think this is a promising way of looking at architectural design, a way that cross-cuts traditional categories of palaces and temples to discern the functions important to the builders. If we are on

the right track, then rites of accession were important in the northern lowlands through the long span of Precolumbian civilization there. Cosmology framed and legitimated such rites, providing rulership with ideological links to ordinary people. We have alluded to some examples of resurrection-accession buildings in the southern lowlands. There are others, including Structure 19 at Yaxchilan (Tate 1992) (Fig. 14) and Temple 11 at Copan (Baudez 1991) (Fig. 15). With continued

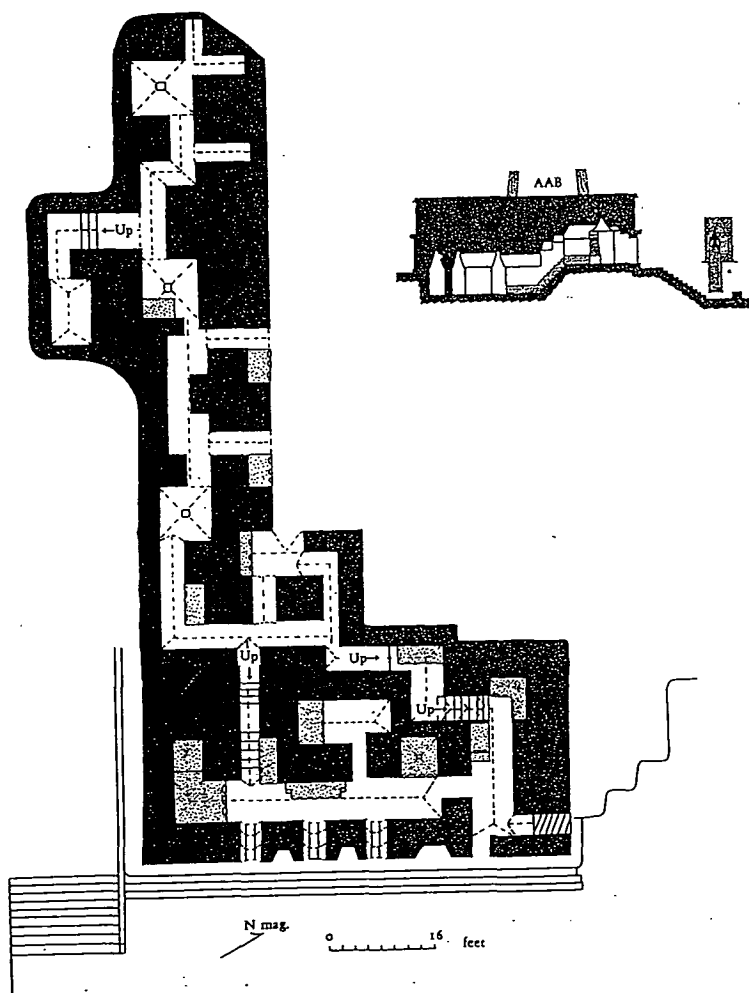


FIG. 14.—Structure 19 at Yaxchilan (From Tate 1992: Fig. 71).

research, we expect to confirm substantial consensus between the southern and northern lowland Maya concerning the rites of royal accession, a consensus that challenges existing notions of major cultural differences between these regions in the Precolumbian era.

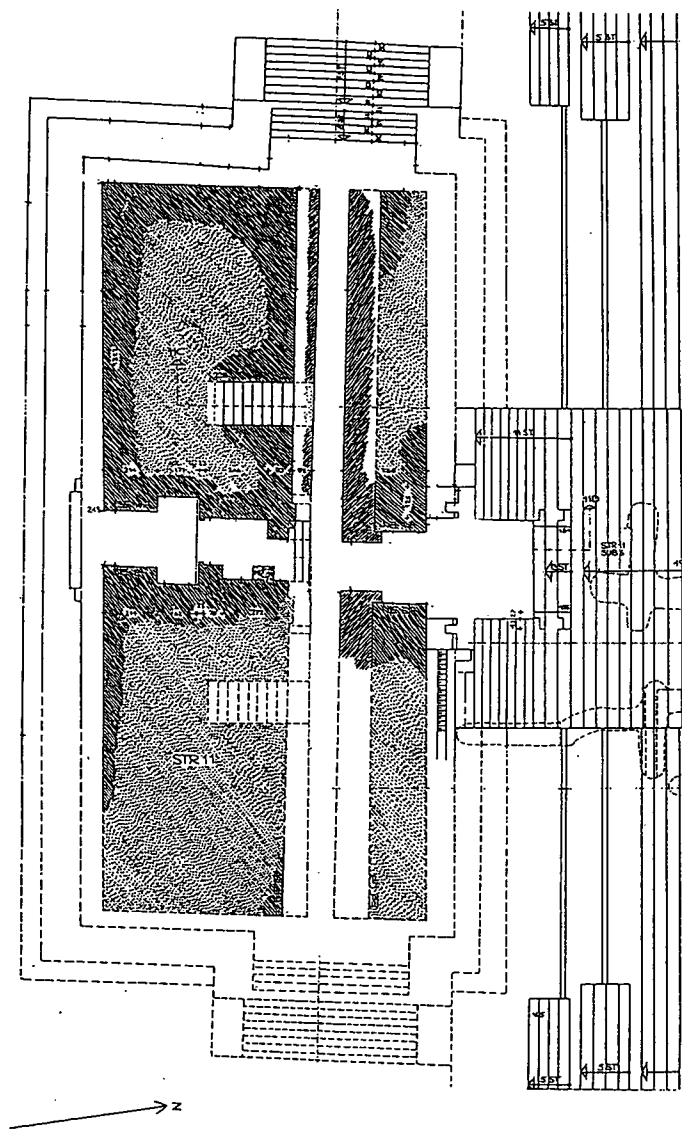


FIG. 15.—Temple 11 at Copan (From Baudéz 1991: Fig. 1).

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