

Craft Production by Classic Maya Elites in Domestic Settings: Data from Rapidly Abandoned Structures at Aguateca, Guatemala

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ABSTRACT

Extensive excavations of rapidly abandoned structures at the Classic Maya center of Aguateca have provided rich assemblages of complete and reconstructible objects. A particularly interesting result is the presence of objects related to scribal and artistic production in all rapidly abandoned elite residences that have been excavated. Although evidence of such activities is difficult to detect in gradually abandoned structures, researchers need to consider the possibility that a significant portion of elites engaged in scribal and artistic work in their houses.

Key words: Aguateca, Guatemala, rapid abandonment sites, the Classic Maya, craft production

RESUMEN

La excavación intensiva de estructuras abandonadas súbitamente en el centro maya clásico de Aguateca han traído a la luz numerosos y valiosos conjuntos de objetos, tanto completos como reconstruibles. En particular, hay que destacar la presencia de artefactos relacionados con prácticas artísticas y escriturarias que han sido hallados en la totalidad de las residencias de élite así abandonadas. Este hecho permite considerar la posibilidad de que un número significativo de miembros de la élite llevaran a cabo trabajos artísticos y relacionados con el uso de la escritura en sus propias viviendas; se reconoce, no obstante, la dificultad de conseguir este tipo de evidencia en las excavaciones realizadas en viviendas que fueron abandonadas gradualmente.

Palabras clave: Aguateca, Guatemala, abandono rápido, periodo Clásico Maya, producción artesanal.

The study of specialized production in domestic settings is an important component of household ar-

chaeology. In modern societies, there usually exists a relatively clear division between homes and work places. This relates to a conceptual distinction between what may be called the «domestic» or «private» sphere and the «official» or «public» sphere. In premodern societies, such a distinction is generally less clear. Residences may serve as arenas where the occupants engage in political, economic, and ritual interactions with non-household members. These activities may be considered «official» or «public» in their nature. In addition, it is common in preindustrial societies for individuals to conduct not only domestic production for intra-household consumption but also specialized production for extra-household exchange in and around their residences. Thus, the analysis of specialized production in domestic settings is a necessary step toward a critical understanding of relations among household members and relations of households to other households and to surrounding economic and political organizations (Arnold 1991; Costin 1991; Hendon 1996; McAnany 1993; Mills 1995).

In this paper, we examine the production of artistic objects by Classic Maya elites in domestic settings. Finely crafted Maya artifacts, such as painted ceramics and shell ornaments, have long fascinated scholars and the general public. Sophisticated execution of such objects presents a strong aesthetic appeal that even transcends the barriers of time and culture that separate their producers from modern viewers. The epigraphic and iconographic record suggests that some of the artists who produced such fine objects were also scribes and belonged to the elite stratum of society (Coe 1977; Coe and Kerr 1997; Reents-Budet 1994, 1998; Stuart 1989b). However, archaeological evidence on craft production by elite artists is limited, and little is known about the system of such production and its socio-economic implications. Recent excavations of rapidly abandoned elite residences at the Classic Maya center of Aguateca have provided unique archaeological data on craft production by elite artists.

In this article, we present the preliminary results of investigations at Aguateca into the issue of elite craft specialization. We then discuss the implications of our data for the study of Classic Maya households in general¹. Following the general themes of the journal issue (Inomata and Sheets, this issue), we address two main problems: (1) implications of Aguateca data for understanding the nature of specialized craft production by Classic Maya elites in domestic settings; and (2) implications of Aguateca data for the study of archaeological evidence of craft production by elites found in gradually abandoned structures.

With regard to the first issue, we explore various related questions. Did a large portion of elites engage in this kind of activity, or did only a small portion of elites specialize in craft production? What was the degree of specialization among elite artists (Costin 1991)? Did all elite craftspersons engage in similar sets of activity, or did each of them specialize in a specific type of work, such as painting ceramics, carving shell ornaments, or painting codices? Were elites artists full-time or part-time specialists? These questions lead to the issue of household organization. How was craft production articulated with domestic activities, such as food preparation? How was the division of labor within a household configured? As to the second issue, we examine how different modes of abandonment would affect the archaeological record related to craft production by elites. We then explore directions for future research.

PREVIOUS STUDIES OF CRAFT PRODUCTION BY CLASSIC MAYA ELITES

Most studies of Maya artistic production by elites have utilized epigraphic and iconographic evidence. Most evidence regarding Maya scribes and artists dates to the Late Classic period (A.D. 600-900). Many ceramic paintings depict individuals engaging in scribal work and artistic production, suggesting that this type of activity was a concern for Maya elites. Through the analysis of such iconographic data and analogies from Postclassic codices and Colonial-period documents, Coe (1977) proposed that Classic Maya scribes were also artists responsible for skillful crafting and that they were part of the ruling elite. Epigraphic studies have demonstrated that some texts written on ceramic vessels and stone monuments record the names of the scribes

or carvers (Stuart 1987, 1989a, 1989b). Such decipherment has further supported Coe's argument (see Coe and Kerr 1997; Reents-Budet 1994, 1998).

Archaeological evidence of craft production by elites, however, has been limited. Certain artifacts, including halved-shell ink pots, are clearly related to scribal and artistic work, but most archaeological specimens are looted objects or were found in tombs, such as Burial 116 of Tikal and Burial XXXVII-4 of Copán (Fash 1991: 106-111; Hoffman 1997; Reents-Budet 1994: 42-43). The presence of painting implements in some tombs points to the association of certain high-status personages with scribal and artistic work, but these findings do not represent the context of craft activities. The most important archaeological evidence regarding elite scribes and artists was found in Group 9N-8 of Copán (Webster 1989). This was one of the largest elite residential compounds at this center. A hieroglyphic bench found in the main building records the name of the household head and points to his high status and to his close relation to the ruler (Fash 1991: 162). Sculptures of scribes and of a scribal god found associated with this building indicate that this high-status noble was a scribe. Moreover, in Str. 110B of this compound, Randolph Widmer found clear evidence of the production of shell ornaments and other objects. This structure collapsed probably due to an earthquake, sealing considerable *de facto* refuse. The excavators suspect that the elite craftspersons worked in this building under the command of the noble scribe (Webster *et al.* 1993: 282-287). These data from Copán provide crucial evidence that elites conducted craft production in domestic settings. Excavations at Buenavista by Joseph Ball and Jennifer Taschek (Ball 1993) have revealed numerous ceramic wasters in the palace complex. These materials, however, may have resulted from workshop manufacture controlled by elites rather than from household production. It is not clear whether the producers were elites or lower-class individuals.

The scarcity of archaeological evidence on scribal and artistic work by elites is partly due to the nature of such activities. Most scribal implements were either perishable (e.g., brushes) or small, durable, and valuable (e.g., shell ink pots and stone mortars and pestles for pigment preparation). Durable and valuable objects were rarely discarded in middens and were often carried to the next residence when scribes/artists abandoned structures. Other types of objects used by elite artists (e.g., carving tools) may be difficult to distinguish from tools for non-skilled or non-

¹ In a separate article, Inomata (n.d.) examines the political and ideological dimensions of artistic production by Classic Maya elites.

specialized work. Moreover, the output of craft production by elites was probably small, and its debitage may be difficult to detect. Given this nature of craft work by elites, unambiguous evidence of such activities may be gained only through the excavation of rapidly abandoned structures. In this regard, the rapidly abandoned central part of Aguateca presents an ideal situation for the archaeological study of scribal and artistic work by Classic Maya elites.

ABANDONMENT OF AGUATECA

Aguateca is located in the lowland rainforest in the southwestern part of El Petén, Guatemala (Inomata and Sheets in this issue: Figure 1). Early investigations at Aguateca by Graham (1967) and Houston (1993) focused on mapping and the study of hieroglyphic inscriptions.

From 1990 to 1993, Inomata supervised the first systematic archaeological work at this site as part of the Petexbatun Regional Archaeological Project directed by Arthur Demarest. This research demonstrated that the major occupation of Aguateca as a political center took place during the eighth century A.D. Toward the end of the Classic period, warfare in the region appears to have intensified and a series of defensive walls were constructed. Aguateca was probably attacked by enemies around A.D. 800 and the elite residential area in its central part was burned. Excavations of burned structures in the central part (Strs. M7-35, M8-10, M8-11, and M8-17) revealed numerous complete and reconstructible objects, indicating that the elite residents of the central part fled or were taken away rapidly, leaving a large portion of their belongings behind (Demarest 1997; Demarest *et al.* 1997; Inomata 1995, 1997; Inomata and Stiver 1998). From 1996 to 1999, Inomata and Triadan directed the Aguateca Archaeological Project with Erick Ponciano, focusing on the extensive excavation of rapidly abandoned structures in the central part (Inomata *et al.* 1997; 1998).

Among these extensively excavated structures, Strs. M7-35, M8-4, M8-8, and M8-10 are most likely residential buildings occupied by sub-royal elite households. The residential function of these buildings is indicated by the presence of numerous domestic items, including manos and metates for corn grinding, storage, cooking, and serving vessels, and various types of lithic tools (Triadan, this issue). Our interpretation of the high status of their residents is based on the following points. First, these buildings are located along the Causeway immediately south of the Palace Group, which was most likely a residential compound of the royal family. The area along the Causeway was probably the most important elite residential area at this center. Second, the layout of defensive walls indicates that the Palace Group and the area along the Causeway were the most heavily defended parts. This points to the political power and symbolic importance of the residents of this area. Third, these buildings are relatively large and elaborately built. Some of the smaller buildings in the area, such as Str. M8-13, were probably occupied by lower-class households. Fourth, these structures contained numerous prestige goods, such as shell ornaments with hieroglyphic texts and jade beads. This contrasts to Str. M8-13, a possible lower-class residence, which contained a similar set of domestic items but was nearly devoid of prestige goods.

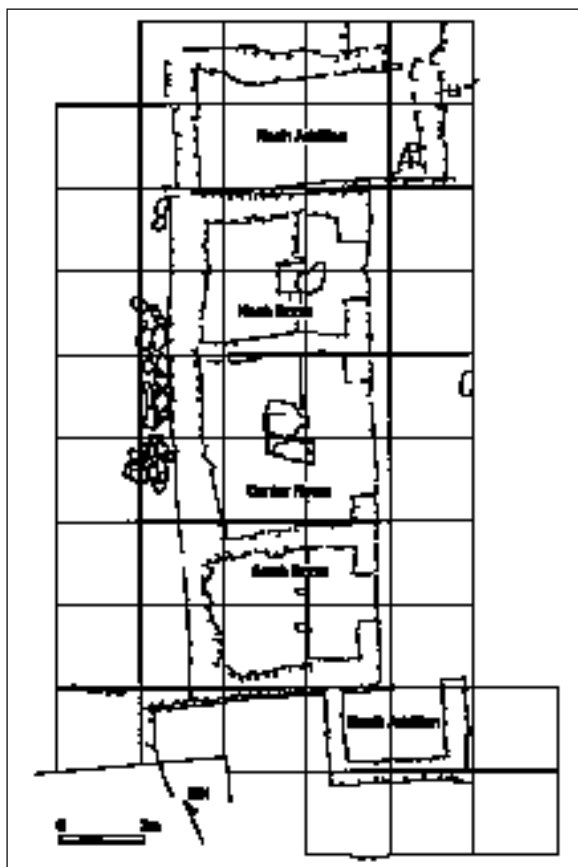


Figure 1. Plan of Str. M8-8.

The abandonment of the central part of Aguateca appears to have been abrupt and rapid, which is implied by the presence of numerous small and valuable objects, such as shell ornaments and jade beads, under collapsed walls. Although the residents or enemies might have taken the most valuable objects, a large portion of objects was left behind in and around these buildings. The preservation conditions of these objects, however, are not optimal. The masonry walls probably collapsed during or soon after the fire, as wooden beams and roofs burned. Many ceramic vessels were smashed by collapsing stones and roofing materials. Many shell objects were also damaged by fire. Most organic materials disintegrated after the abandonment due to the tropical weather and the shallowness of the deposits. As noted in the introduction to this issue, we should keep in mind that the residents lived the last days of Aguateca under the threat of an imminent enemy attack. Nevertheless, as discussed elsewhere (Inomata 1995; Inomata and Stiver 1998), various lines of evidence suggest to us that the residents of the central part of Aguateca essentially maintained their traditional patterns of space use and activity.

CRAFT PRODUCTION BY ELITES AT AGUATECA

All of the four above-mentioned elite residential structures contained evidence of scribal and artistic work. All of them are range structures (Figure 1). The core part of each building consisted of three rooms with elevated floors and benches, which we call the center room, and north and south rooms (or east and west rooms, depending on the orientation of the building). The center rooms contained a relatively small number of objects, and appear to have been used primarily for official business of the household heads, such as gatherings and receiving visitors. Side rooms (north and south rooms or east and west rooms) probably were used for various activities, including sleeping, food consumption, and crafting. These buildings also had more roughly constructed additions on the sides or at the back². Most additions did not have benches, and their floors were usually at the level of the exterior surface. These additions were used for food preparation or crafting activities. Some additions had drainage holes, indicating the use of water.

Structure M8-10, «the House of the Scribe»

Str. M8-10, «the House of the Scribe», consisted of five rooms (Inomata and Stiver 1998). Excavators found two stone mortars and four pestles for pigment preparation inside and in front of the center room. It is probable that the household head conducted scribal work in this room. Also found in the center room were unworked shells. It is not clear whether they were raw materials for shell ornaments. Inside and in front of the north room, the field crew uncovered six stone mortars, two pestles, and four halved-shell ink pots, which were clearly associated with scribal work. Stone mortars found in the center and north room were made of various materials, including limestone, igneous stone, sandstone, and chert. Polished axes found in this room may have been used for carving. The north room also contained numerous shell and two carved human skulls. Some of them may have been worked by a resident of the buildings. One shell ornament was carved with a glyphic text, containing the scribal title, *its'aat* (see Stuart 1987). Carving on the other side of the shell ornament depicted a profile of a scribe. It remains unclear whether this item was owned by a resident of the structure or whether it was produced by a resident by commission for a patron. Either way, it presents clear evidence that an occupant of this building was a scribe. One of the carved human skulls had a glyphic text, mentioning an accession ceremony attended by the last ruler of Aguateca, which suggests the high status of the scribe.

In the south room we found numerous large storage jars. This room appears to have had a storage function. Also found in the south room were several bone needles and spindle whorls. Throughout Mesoamerica, textile production is consistently a female activity (Anawalt 1981:11-14; Cordry and Cordry 1968: 42-49). The south room may have been used mainly by a female, possibly a wife of the scribe. It is interesting to note that some shell ornaments found in this structure had small holes and appear to have been sewn on to clothes. A wife of the scribe may have helped her husband by sewing ornaments on the textiles she produced. The north and south addition were probably used for food preparation and storage.

Under the floor of the center room excavators uncovered an extended burial of an adult male. This also points to the association of the household head with

² Some of the additions were clearly added later to the core part (three main rooms) of the buildings. Others, however, may have been part of the original construction.

the center room. However, the burial only contained one vessel as an offering, and there were no objects that would suggest the buried individual's identity as a scribe. There was a dense midden to the south of this building. Although this midden may also contain trash from nearby structures, a large portion of midden materials probably derived from Str. M8-10. It contained a moderate amount of bone-work debitage and a small number of shell pieces (Table 1, Figure 2). A finding of particular interest was a carved human skull (Figure 3). Also found in this midden were three possible stone pestles. However, they were of rough shapes unlike the finely made chert pestles found inside the structure.

Table 1. Frequencies of artifact fragments in the midden to the south of Str. M8-14.

Bone tools and ornaments	16
Bone debitage	9
Shell ornaments or debitage	3
Possible stone pestles (not chert, rough shapes)	3
Ceramic vessels	10,652
Other ceramic artifacts	30
Chipped stone artifacts/hammer-rubbing stone	556
Metates	3
Manos	8



Figure 2. Bone work debitage found in the midden to the south of Str. M8-14.



Figure 3. Worked human skull found in the midden to the south of Str. M8-14.

Structure M7-35, «the House of the Niche»

Str. M7-35, which we call «the House of the Niche», had three main rooms and three small back rooms. The main rooms were probably used for gatherings, sleeping, food preparation and consumption, and storage. The coarsely built back rooms appear to have been used for craft production. In these rooms, excavators found three polished axes and a set of a stone mortar and a pestle for pigment preparation³. Coarse chert tools and utilitarian ceramic vessels found in these rooms may also be related to crafting activities.

Structure M8-8, «the House of the Axes»

Str. M8-8, «the House of the Axes», had three main rooms and two additions. The main rooms were probably used for sleeping, food consumption, and other domestic activities, as well as for receiving visitors. The small south addition seems to have served for storage. Excavators found 18 polished axes in two concentrations, one in front of the north room and the other in the north addition (Figure 4). They include axes of large, medium, and small sizes, as well as of a chisel shape, and appear to have formed a tool kit of a carver. The use-wear analysis by Aoyama (1999) sug-

³ The eastern part of the center back room and the east back room remained unexcavated because of a tree standing there. These parts were later excavated by the Guatemalan restoration project. Guatemalan archaeologists found another stone mortar (Urquizú, personal communication, 1999).

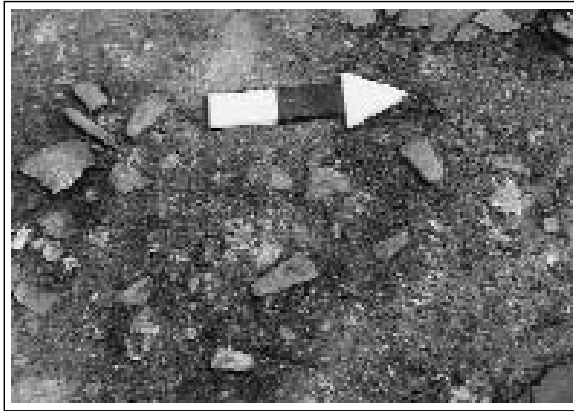


Figure 4. Axes found in the North Addition of Str. M8-8.

gests that they were used for carving stone. It is probable that a resident of «the House of the Axes» was a stela carver. Only one stone mortar was found in the north addition.

Structure M8-4, «the House of the Mirrors»

Str. M8-4, «the House of the Mirrors», had three relatively spacious rooms. There may have been an addition made of perishable materials on the northern side. Seven stone mortars and two pestles were found in the center room. Excavators also found three chert mortars in front of the south room (Figure 5). This distribution pattern is similar to that of «the House of the Scribe». Yet most mortars found in «the House of the

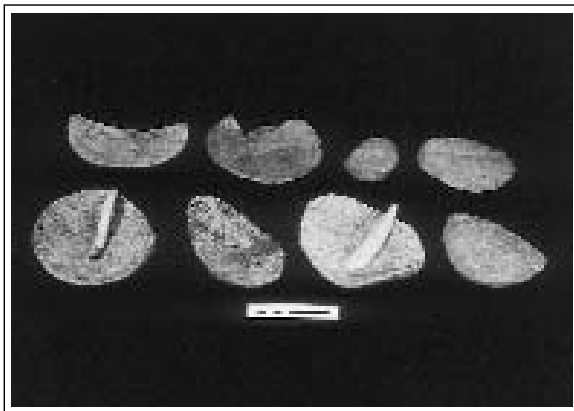


Figure 5. Chert mortars found in Str. M8-4.

Mirrors» were made of chert, which stands in contrast to those of «the House of the Scribe» made of diverse stone types. We are currently analyzing these implements to examine the possibility that the artist who lived in this structure primarily used a type of paint different from that used by the scribe of «the House of the Scribe». The north room appears to have been used for various domestic activities. Two bone artifacts found in the north room were carved with hieroglyphs, including the Aguateca emblem glyph. This points to the high status of the residents of the structure. The south room contained more than 200 pieces of pyrite mirror pieces. Some of them were still attached to ceramic mirror backs, and were clearly part of a mosaic mirror. A small number of pyrite pieces had rough edges and may have been unfinished pieces. Excavators, however, did not find unworked chunks of pyrite. Further analysis is necessary before we can determine whether a resident of this structure manufactured pyrite mirrors. Also found in the south room were worked alabaster pieces. Stephen Houston identified them as part of a royal headdress. It is possible that a resident of this building was a high courtier responsible for the storage and maintenance of royal regalia.

DISCUSSION

The Nature of Craft Production by Elites

The excavated elite residences do not provide statistically representative samples. Nonetheless, it is meaningful that all of the four excavated elite residences contained evidence of craft production. These buildings probably represent a significant portion of the highest-ranking courtiers of Aguateca. It is probable that scribal and artistic activities were even more wide-spread among elites than previously suspected. The output of craft production by each elite artist appears to have been small, as suggested by midden materials associated with Str. M8-10. It is unlikely that these elite artists were dedicated solely to artistic production. The small output of craft production probably represents part-time specialization. Moreover, it is probable that these scribes/artists were at the same time responsible for other types of duty in the court, including administrative, diplomatic, and ritual work. Part of these official or public duties may have been carried out in the center rooms of elite residences.

Elite scribes/artists most likely shared certain sets of skills and knowledge. Their work must have been ba-

sed on esoteric knowledge of writings, religion, history, calendar, and astronomy, as well as technical skills. Once they mastered such knowledge, it could have been applied to various media. The scribe of Str. M8-10, for example, appears to have painted codices and made shell and bone ornaments. At the same time, we recognize certain differences in types of work conducted in the excavated elite residences. The resident of Str. M7-35 may have engaged in carving sculptures using polished axes. Str. M8-8 contained a even larger number of axes and the resident appears to have been particularly focused on stela carving. In Str. M8-4 the emphasis was more on work involving the use of pigments. In this regard, Str. M8-4 may be similar to Str. M8-10. Nonetheless, one needs to consider the possibility that differences in types of stone used for mortars in Strs. M8-4 and M8-10 relate to different sets of pigments.

These scribes/artists carried out at least part of their craft work in and around their residences, next to mundane domestic activities. It appears that there was not a clear distinction between residences for domestic life and workshops for craft activities. This, however, does not mean that spatial segregation between domestic activities and artistic work did not exist within each residence. As mentioned above, the center rooms were probably used primarily for official and public business, such as gatherings. In Strs. M8-4 and M8-10, the center rooms may also have been places where the household head painted codices and kept official records. In these two residences, one of the side rooms was associated with craft activities, while the other side room was used primarily for domestic activities. In Strs. M8-8 and M7-35, implements for crafting were found in additions and back rooms.

Given the fact that certain craft activities were conducted in domestic settings, it is likely that the system of craft production was closely related to household organization. Interestingly, all scribes/artists clearly identifiable in the epigraphic and iconographic record are males (Houston, personal communication, 1999)⁴. We, therefore, assume that the artists of the excavated structures at Aguateca were also males. We need to consider the possibility that their wives and other household members participated in the process of artistic production as well. For example, a wife of the scribe of Str. M8-10 may have helped her husband by providing textiles, on to which the artist's products were sewn. Spindle whorls were also found in other exca-

vated elite residences. It is also possible that apprentices of the scribes/artists, who may have lived in other buildings, helped their masters.

Implications for the Study of Materials from Gradually Abandoned Structures

The recognition of artistic production in the central part of Aguateca was significantly facilitated by its rapid abandonment patterns. At a gradually abandoned site, remains of small-scale craft production and scribal work by elites may be extremely subtle or nearly obliterated. Some implements, such as stone mortars and greenstone axes, are durable and probably valuable, and were rarely discarded. If elite artists abandoned a center gradually, they most likely carried these items to their next residences (see Cameron and Tomka 1993; Schiffer 1987; Stevenson 1982). In addition, the male burial found under the floor of the center room of Str. M8-10 did not contain objects directly related to artistic production. Although we cannot dismiss the possibility that the household head of a previous generation was not an artist, it is also likely that elite craftsmen were not always buried with artistic or scribal implements.

In addition to the durability and high value of scribal and artistic implements, the low output of production by elite artists makes the identification of artistic activities from midden materials difficult. In the case of Str. M8-10 at Aguateca, a moderate amount of bone refuse and a small number of shell fragments in a associated midden point to some kind of craft activities. Yet, midden data alone may not be enough to determine whether these materials were used for the manufacturing of prestige items or for less «expensive» utilitarian objects.

Because the identification of scribal/artistic activities would be extremely difficult in gradually abandoned structures, a lack of evidence of artistic production in elite residences at other centers does not necessarily mean that the residents were not artists. On the other hand, we should not be overly pessimistic. Careful examination of excavated materials may lead to the identification of subtle residues of such activities. The analysis of possible production debitage is naturally most important. The midden to the south of Str. M8-10 did contain artifacts related to artistic production, such as a carved human skull and an unfinished shell ob-

⁴ Coe (Coe and Kerr 1997) suggests that some ceramic paintings depict female scribes/artists.

ject. The presence of these objects, though in a small quantity, provides an important clue. In addition, in a midden associated with Str. M8-15, we found small fragments of a chert pestle similar to complete specimens from Strs. M8-4 and M8-10. Such small fragments may often be overlooked, unless researchers search specifically for evidence of scribal and artistic activities.

Important information on scribal and artistic activities by elites may be gained through the analysis of almost invisible residues (see Manzanilla and Barba 1990; Middleton 1998; Middleton and Price 1996). We believe that the study of soil chemistry is particularly promising. Since most elite residences have stucco floors, even micro debitage may not remain in the areas of production. Some chemical elements, on the other hand, would be absorbed into the plaster and would remain fairly stable. The use of pigments involved in scribal and artistic activities by elites may leave high concentrations of such elements as Fe, Cu, and Hg. Richard Terry, a soil scientist, is now conducting a systematic chemical analysis of soil samples taken from rapidly abandoned structures of Aguateca. Through a comparison with floor assemblages, we hope to refine the interpretation of soil chemistry related to scribal and artistic work by elites.

CONCLUSIONS

Rapidly abandoned structures provide unique data that may not be available in usual archaeological situations. In particular, the study of craft activities by elites is a topic in which data from rapidly abandoned structures can provide crucial contributions. Because the output of production by elite artists was usually fairly small and most of their implements were

small, durable, and valuable, unambiguous evidence of craft production by elite artists may be gained only at rapidly abandoned sites. We found evidence of scribal/artistic activities in all of the four excavated elite residences at Aguateca. Although these excavated buildings do not provide statistically representative samples, researchers should consider the possibility that such activities were more common than previously suspected. A particularly important finding at Aguateca is that at least some portion of scribal and artistic activities was carried out in domestic settings in and around elite residences. This suggests that the system of artistic production by elites was closely related to household organization. Most scribes/artists appear to have been males. It is probable that females and other household members, as well as apprentices, helped master artists in some stages of production. In the case of gradually abandoned structures, the identification of scribal and artistic work is not easy. Yet, important information may be gained through careful excavation and analysis. Moreover, the refinement of techniques, such as soil chemistry analysis, may provide important information.

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