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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

The Architecture of Power and Sociopolitical Complexity in Northwestern Yucatan  
during the Preclassic Period

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

in

Anthropology

by

Nancy Peniche May

Committee in charge:

Professor Geoffrey E. Braswell, Chair  
Professor Guillermo D. Algaze  
Professor Thomas E. Levy

2010



The Thesis of Nancy Peniche May is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2010

## **DEDICATION**

To my parents, brother and nephews.

To the memory of my grandfather.

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## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Architecture of Power and Sociopolitical Complexity in Northwestern Yucatan  
during the Preclassic Period

by

Nancy Peniche May

Master of Arts in Anthropology

University of California, San Diego, 2010

Professor Geoffrey E. Braswell

Recent archaeological explorations elsewhere in the northern Maya lowlands have provided enough evidence to state that social complexity emerged in this region as early as the second half of the Middle Preclassic period (approximately 1000–400/300BC). This has reformulated our understanding about northern Maya lowlands that had been considered as a peripheral place regard as the emergence of sociopolitical organization. Nowadays, the debate is concerned about the nature and level of sociopolitical organization of societies in northern Maya lowlands. That is whether they were at the level of chiefdom or state. I approach this problematic from the analysis of a public building, which I consider as embodying and expressing asymmetrical social

relations. That is it is identified as architecture of power.

A public building, Structure 1714, provides the means to test the models of political organization. Structure 1714 is located at Xamán Susulá, a middle-rank site in the three-tiered settlement pattern hierarchy of northwestern Yucatán, México. This building is the most largest and impressive of the site. It is characterized by the presence of the earliest throne reported in the entire Maya lowlands. The analysis of Structure 1714, in conjunction with the plan of the site and the regional settlement pattern, indicates that Xamán Susulá was organized at the level of chiefdom. Most importantly, I state that this society was an individualizing chiefdom that employed an exclusionary or network strategy of political integration.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The objective of this thesis is to study the sociopolitical organization present in northwestern Yucatan during the Middle Preclassic period. The means through which I want to reach this goal is the analysis of a public building.

The Middle Preclassic period (approximately 1000–400/300BC) is a time of great interest in the history of the northern Maya Lowlands, as well as elsewhere in Mesoamerica, because it witnessed the emergence and consolidation of social and political complexity. Nonetheless, the scale and nature of social and political organization during this period are still topics of debate. Specifically, the debate among Maya archaeologists centers on the question of whether Middle Preclassic societies were at the level of chiefdom or state.

In the anthropological literature there is a discussion about the correctness of assigning societies to taxonomic types that measure them in a progression of hierarchical complexity (Feinman and Neitzel 1984; Yoffee 1994, 2005). These critiques have been mainly directed to the application of the category of chiefdom. The problem has increased because the key attributes that define the concept of chiefdom have changed over the time (Yoffee 1994, 2005) and because the term “chiefdom” has been utilized to name several societies whose sociopolitical organization is diverse (Blanton et al. 1996; Flannery 1999; Feinman 1991; Feinman and Neitzel 1984; Renfrew 1974). Yoffee (1994:73; Yoffee et al. 2005) has completely rejected the existence of chiefdoms in ancient times, challenging the applicability of ethnographic analogies in understanding the archaeological record.

Despite these critiques, the concept of chiefdom has been retained, although

sometimes with a change of name (see Trigger 2003). I consider that the category of chiefdom is heuristically useful in the sense that it allows us to study and compare societies that are undergoing similar political processes (Earle 2002; Flannery 1999b; Marcus 2008; Spencer 1993: 106). In fact chiefdoms are deeply interesting because they represent the emergence and consolidation of social and political complexity. Therefore anyone interested in studying the emergence of social and political complexity must address their attention to chiefdom-level societies, although those studies must always take into consideration the organizational variability that these societies present.

There are several means through which we can approximate the social and political organization of complex societies. Among them we can mention the analysis of the architecture of power. Here I follow the principles proposed by Moore (1996) in his study of the architecture of power in the Andes. As Moore pointed out, through the study of the architecture of power, we can know the level of political organization of an ancient society because architecture embodies and expresses asymmetrical social relations. This is because one expression of power is the organization of social effort necessary to build this type of architecture. As the nature of the relations of power changes, the architecture of power might change as well. Hence architecture of power is a useful tool in understanding the scale and nature of the political organization of ancient societies.

This discussion is relevant in the case of the northern Maya Lowlands. Recent explorations in this region have provided evidence that social and political complexity was present since the Middle Preclassic period (approximately 1000 – 400/300BC).

However, archaeologists argue about the level of complexity that those Middle Preclassic polities held. That is whether chiefdom-level or state-level societies were present. Explorations at a small site near Mérida, Yucatán, México, named Xamán Susulá, have provided information that may be useful in examining the models of political organization proposed for the Middle Preclassic period in the northern Maya lowlands. These explorations revealed a building, Structure 1714-Asub, whose unique architectural and functional features are helpful in resolving this debate.

Through the analysis of Structure 1714-Asub, I propose that polities in the northern Maya Lowlands were organized at the chiefdom level. Most importantly, I argue that this society was an individualizing chiefdom that employed an exclusionary or network strategy of political integration (Blanton et al. 1996; Renfrew 1974).

In order to reach my objective I structure this thesis in five sections. The first section has the goal of exposing the theoretical framework that this research follows. Mainly, this section is focused on presenting the characteristics of the architecture of power predominant in the Maya Area in chiefdom-level and state-level societies. First of all, I define what architecture of power is and how it can be used as a means to study social and political complexity. Later, I discuss the attributes of palaces as the main type of building expressing asymmetrical relations in some state societies. The architecture of power typical for chiefdom societies is presented in another part. Because these latter types of built forms are less studied I discuss models of chiefdoms, in order to establish the archaeological correlates that we expect to find according to the type of society we are dealing with.

The next section is divided into three parts. The first part is centered on

providing a context for the Middle Preclassic period in Mesoamerica in general and the Maya area in particular. The second part refers to the Preclassic evidence that has been recovered in diverse sites in the northern Maya Lowlands. The third part discusses the models of political organization that have been developed on basis of this evidence.

The following section is concerned with the presentation of the data precedent from Xamán Susulá. The description of the data emphasizes Structure 1714, mainly during the construction stage dating to the Middle Preclassic to Late Preclassic transition. Because the public function of the structure cannot be understood by itself, I also discuss the arrangement of the site during this period as well as the artifact assemblages recovered during the explorations.

In the two next two sections I present the discussion and the conclusions of the thesis. In brief, the goal of these sections is to demonstrate that Structure 1714-Sub from Xamán Susulá is unique public building that belonged to a chiefdom-level society that used an exclusionary strategy of political integration.



# **1. ARCHITECTURE OF POWER AND ITS RELATION TO SOCIAL AND POLITICAL COMPLEXITY**

## **1.1. Architecture of power**

Throughout the anthropological and archaeological literature, architecture or “built forms” have been used as a means to study several aspects of ancient societies (see Kolb 1994; Lawrence and Low 1990). Such studies are based on the principle that man-made constructions, as part of the built environment, can reflect a variety of cultural behaviors. The current approaches consider that architecture also has an active part in this relation because built forms shape cultural behavior as well (Lawrence and Low 1990; Moore 1996). That is, the relation between architecture and human behavior is interactive.

Among the multiple aspects of ancient societies that we can reach through the study of the architecture, I am interested in the ways that architecture reproduces the development of different forms of social organization, mainly social relations associated with power. This thesis is based on the idea that built forms and the meanings associated with them are manipulated by elites to communicate values in relation to social and political change (Lawrence and Low 1990:469; see also Kolb 1994). Both public and residential structures are useful in the study of sociopolitical organization, although the information about the nature of relations of power that we can obtain differs according to the type of architecture.

Residences are ideal symbols of status and power. Because of this, residential structures may serve as evidence of asymmetrical social relations because they

represent the social status of their individual occupants. Furthermore, residences collectively express the social structure of the community of which they are part and change in recognizable ways as the social structure of the society changes (Cliff 1988 after Watson 1994:136). Residences as architecture of power include chiefs' houses in chiefdom-level societies and palaces in state-level societies. However, we have to take into consideration that the later structures combine residential and public functions. Therefore they exist in the middle range between private and public architecture.

Like residential architecture, the architecture and spatial arrangement of structures that had specialized, non-domestic functions (or "public buildings") can also provide specific information about the nature of the social structure of the community of which they are part (see Blanton et al. 1996; Renfrew 1974). I follow the principle that attributes of public buildings change in recognizable ways as the social organization of the society changes (Kolb 1994; Watson 1994). This change could be as a response to needs related to the set of activities held to be important in each social order, which were performed in the public buildings. Moreover, Moore (1996) argues that public buildings are evidence of differing public orders. This is because the different social entities representing different levels of social complexity vary in relation to their reliance on consent and coercion, which are the twin foundations of power (Moore 1996). Additionally, if one expression of power is the direction of social effort, public constructions may reflect the exercise of power in concrete form.

The definition of public buildings as structures that had specialized, non-domestic functions is closely related to the range of activities that are defined as domestic. Therefore, the attributes of public buildings might change according to the

society in question. This variation creates difficulty in proposing general criteria for identifying public buildings that apply to all societies.

In Mesoamerica, Marcus and Flannery (1996:91) have proposed some attributes that can help identify public buildings. According to them, public buildings are usually built on the highest places and subfloor dedicatory offerings are a common feature. Marcus and Flannery have also pointed out that it is not unusual that this type of buildings be rebuilt several times in the same place. However, these criteria are also some of the formal attributes that have been proposed to identify buildings with some type of ceremonial or ritual function (see Brown and Sheets 2000; Lesure 1999). This misinterpretation is due to the fact that in Mesoamerican archaeological literature, “public building” is often used as synonym for ceremonial or ritual structure. Yet the range of public activities that were performed by ancient Mesoamerican societies include more than ceremonies and ritual activities. Therefore, we might expect to find a variety of public buildings, with a single function or multifunctional, and the architectural attributes of these buildings would vary according to their function.

As stated above, to correctly identify these buildings it is important to know the variety of public activities performed by ancient societies. This identification is crucial when we are interested in describing the level of social complexity because some types of buildings are diagnostic of specific social structures. The goal of the following sections is to present the characteristics of those buildings that provide evidence about the nature of social structure. That is, these sections refer to the architecture of power related to complex societies. Because I argue that the characteristics of architecture of power depend on the characteristics of each society, I will discuss information mainly

related to Mesoamerica or the Maya area, except when this is not possible because of the lack of information.

A word of caution: I recognize that the argument “form follows function” might be circular and lose sight of the diverse roles that a structure can play within various social contexts. However, I think that architectural characteristics of buildings do suggest the function or range of functions that a structure could have performed. In order to be certain, the function must be confirmed through an analysis of the artifact assemblage to determine what activities were carried out in or near the buildings.

## **1.2 Architecture of power in state societies: Palaces as elite residences and public spaces**

Throughout the Maya archaeological literature there has been a broad discussion about what the term “palace” means and how to identify palace structures. This problem has its roots in the 16<sup>th</sup> century when Spaniards applied the term to those large, impressive buildings where kings supposedly lived. This continued into the 19<sup>th</sup> century with Stephen (Webster 2001:133; Webster and Inomata 1998:152). As the theocratic model of Classic society gained acceptance in the 1920’s, archaeologists continued to use the term palace although only as a purely descriptive term - as a default category for structures whose uses were unclear (Webster and Inomata 1998:152). Since then, the term has been used to name those large, masonry structures with vaulted ceilings, which are usually set on low platforms and consist of linear, multi-chambered arrangements of rooms (G. Andrews 1975 in Inomata and Triadan 2003; Christie 2003:1; Webster 2001:133; Webster and Inomata 1998:152).

As the number of excavated buildings increased, the problem of the functional aspect emerged again. A broad discussion about whether palaces – a term with morphological connotation – had a residential function or whether they were just administrative or ritual places has continued into the present (Webster 2001). Explorations in several ancient cities have proved that some buildings deemed palaces because of their architectural characteristics had a residential function. For example, Group 9N-8 at Copán (Diamanti 1991), the Palace Group at Aguateca (Inomata 1997), and Structures 23 and 11 at Yaxchilán (McAnany and Plank 2001) served as residences of members of the elite. Following this recognition, some archaeologists more recently have defined “palace” as the residential precinct of the king or ruling elite of each center (i.e. Clark and Hansen 2001), or named any elaborated building a palace (Lowe 1960 in Clark and Hansen 2001).

However, many archaeologists agree that palaces were not only residences of elite but they were also often seats of government and administration. There has also been debate about whether the term “palace” should be reserved only for the residences or administrative buildings of kingly leaders. Some researchers claim that only rulers had palaces (Christie 2003, 2006), while other archaeologists allege that other higher dignitaries also lived in palaces (Webster and Inomata 1998).

This discussion serves to highlight the fact that the term “palace” is a confusing concept in the Maya archaeological literature. The attributes that define palaces have been not clearly established inasmuch as formal and functional attributes are mixed. To move forward in this debate, we have to dissociate the formal and functional aspects that have been associated with the term palace. I agree that those large, masonry

structures with vaulted ceilings, and linear, multi-chambered arrangements of rooms which can be set on low platforms or pyramidal bases must be designated “range-type structures” (see Harrison 2001:86). This is a designation based on morphological or architectural attributes without denoting function. Attributes that define the term palace must be functional and not related to architectural characteristics of structures (Ball and Taschek 2001:165). I consider that the best definition of palace is that given by Webster and Inomata:

Palaces are the residences of individuals of wealth or high social rank, along with their families and retinues, and they include facilities appropriate to the ritual, political, recreational, and economic functions of elite households and individuals as foci of social power (Webster and Inomata 1998:149).

Hence, range structures could have functioned as palaces, but their functions were not limited to the range of activities ascribed to palaces. In fact, from the architectural or formal point of view, it is difficult to establish what attributes define the concept of palace, as palaces vary greatly from region to region, from site to site and through time (see Chase and Chase 2001). A palace can be a single building or a complex of buildings which are part of the same space. For example, in Copán the set of functions that characterize palaces are spread over a series of separate buildings, a “palace compound” (Harrison and Andrews 1998). In contrast, at the Central Acropolis of Tikal the same set of functions centered on a single building that was part of a complex of multifunctional buildings (Harrison and Andrews 1998). The meaning of these differences is unknown. However, what we can suggest is that the different types of architecture served to reflect and reiterate the power and legitimacy of the highest-ranked elite (Pillsbury and Evans 1998:1).

Essentially, from Webster and Inomata's definition we can establish that the concept of palace has two main parts - one as a private residence and another as public place - and both are essential to determine whether a structure was a palace. Another important aspect that we should take into consideration is that palaces are always related to elite activities and are an essential trait of complex stratified societies (Christie 2006:3; Flannery 1998:21). According to Flannery (1998:21), the reason for this is that only state-level societies were able to organize labor to build these kinds of structures. Furthermore, palaces are possessed by the ruler as well as by other nobles. This means that although in archaic societies there is a tendency toward centralization, a significant segment of administrative and judiciary functions is carried out by disparate sectors of society (Inomata and Houston 2001:13).

Despite the fact that palaces can have a great variety of architectural manifestations, certain features consistently appear in the buildings, which correspond to the particular functions of palaces. In the Maya area, private and public spaces are usually separated although not always in a sharp manner. Therefore, palaces tend to be multi-room buildings, each room having a specific function – either residential or public. As residences of the highest authorities of a state-level society, palaces should have evidence of domestic life. Consequently we should be able to identify spaces where domestic activities, such as food production, eating, and craft and artistic production, were carried out. Metates, fire hearths, and food preparation refuse are good indicators of domestic spaces. Craft production facilities may also be present. Additionally, features such as burials of individuals of all ages and sexes, caches, private shrines and long sleeping benches indicate permanent residence (Harrison and

Andrews 1998:114; Webster 2001:154).

Because palaces fulfilled other public functions (i.e. administrative, judiciary, ceremonial and diplomatic functions), they should include facilities and features designed to perform political, economic and ritual activities. In that sense, the architecture of palaces should reflect, to greater or lesser degree, activities like feasts; alliances; rituals witnessed by elite visitors, court members and local subordinates; elite ancestor worship; conjuring; visions; presentation of captives; formal audiences; witnessing of processions; creation of status-reinforcing social distance for the royal household and court; and the claiming of access to or control of special resources or activities (Demarest 2006:119-120).

In Maya literature, open spaces such as enclosed courtyards or plazas have been identified as architectural features of palaces associated with some public or semipublic rituals and exchanges (Pillsbury and Evans 1998:2). Another architectural feature that has been used to identify political, ritual and economical administration in Maya structures is a particular kind of bench, labeled as a “throne”. A bench can be designated as a throne when it is built in the main chamber of a building in front of the central access door to the edifice and placed against the back walls of the room (Valdés 2001:50). Rulers or other high officials sat on this particular kind of bench in order to fulfill the political, economical and ritual administration of the court (Harrison 2003:78). In fact, based on the representations on polychrome vessels from the Late Classic period, we can affirm that structures with thrones were the scenario for multiple kinds of activities. In structures of this type, lords presided over presentations of visiting delegations, presentations of tribute or gifts and public or semi-public ritual



performances, such as divination rituals and the presentation of prisoners (Harrison 2003:123; Reents-Budet 2001:203). However, the main function of thrones was to serve as the literal and symbolic seat of political power (i.e. House E of Palenque).

Thrones are usually present in rooms contained in multi-room buildings with multiple functions, public and private, which allow them to be labeled as palaces. These throne rooms are usually located in the central room of these buildings. Throne rooms in buildings have also been named “scenic palaces” or “presentation palaces” (Valdés 2001). The scenic or presentation palaces are those central rooms in multi-room buildings that have thrones and a wide central doorway that opens toward an open space or plaza (Valdés 2001:151). Sometimes sacbes or causeways are associated to the scenic palaces (Valdés 2001:151). Palaces 32 and 33 at the Group B of Tamarindito and structures M7-22 and M7-32 at the Palace Group of Aguateca are good examples of this kind of structure. These buildings have been interpreted as having different functions than private residences because the width of the doorways does not allow being hidden from sight from outside the building (Valdés 2001:51; see also Valdés 1997). Lords could have been seated on the throne and observed what was happening outside, and people congregated outside would have been able to witness the events inside the room.

Harrison (2001) proposed the term “throne structures,” an architectural type which includes separate single-room buildings with thrones. These buildings are adjoined to residential buildings (i. e. Structure 5D-59 at Tikal; see Harrison 2001:91) or special-function structures (Structure 5D-123 at Tikal; see Harrison 2001:92). The main characteristic is that the access to them is limited and restricted. These structures first appeared at Copán and later they were built at Tikal (Harrison 2001:89). The

construction of these separate throne structures means that at Copán and later at Tikal palace functions were spread over different buildings instead of being centralized on a single structure or complex structure. In other words, private residences and public spaces were separated. Throne structures might have been associated with other kinds of events that did not require the presence of a large number of people, such as certain kinds of rituals, political meetings or less formal events (Valdés 2001:156; see Harrison 2001). Whatever their functions were, throne structures were strictly public buildings and because of that they cannot be categorized as palaces.

It is important to mention that there are some thrones that were built outside of buildings, whether attached to a structure's wall as in the case of Structure M7-32 at Aguateca (Valdés 2001:156) or built on low platforms without evidence of walls or constructions around them and probably with flat roof of perishable materials or a canopy of cotton. An example of this latter style is the throne found in the Lost World Group in Tikal (Valdés 2001:154). It is difficult to infer whether such outside thrones had the same function as the thrones found inside structures, or if they fulfilled very special functions. A polychrome vase discovered in the Lost World Group is important to this question. This vessel depicts a scene that shows a jaguar cub being offered to the Tikal ruler seated on a throne, which resembles the throne mentioned above (Valdés 2001:156). From this, it might be inferred that at least thrones on platforms could have had an administrative function. In fact, Demarest et al. (2003) think that these outside thrones functioned in the same manner as the "presentation palaces."

### **1.3 Architecture of power in chiefdom societies: Chiefly residences and public buildings**

In the Mesoamerican archaeological literature there is a great discrepancy between the attention paid to the main architectural type of state societies, the structures called palaces, and the architecture present in chiefdom-level societies. Because of this, the attributes that define the architecture of chiefdoms - especially the architecture of power, meaning chiefly houses and public buildings - are not very well established. However, through a review of the anthropological and archaeological literature of chiefdoms, it is possible to establish some of these key attributes.

First of all, the main trait that characterizes chiefdoms, architecturally speaking, is the fact that there is a marked separation among the private or domestic spaces and public spaces. That is to say, no structure combines private and public functions. Thus, in contrast to the state societies where palaces were built as both private residences and public spaces, in chiefdom societies structures that exhibit this kind of dual functionality are not present. The reason for the lack of integration of both public and private spaces into a single building could be related to the nature of the political organization in which a chief does not have enough power to centralize all the functions in a single space (Flannery 1998). Additionally, strategies of control or integration may be another answer. In some chiefdom societies, chiefs attain and maintain their power through control of rituals. They could be more interested in investing labor in public buildings rather than their houses. Whatever the explanation is, the fact is that chiefdom societies lack palaces. Instead, they have separate public buildings and private residences where commoners and chiefs live. At the moment, the questions are, first,

whether it is possible to differentiate between elite houses and commoners' houses in chiefdoms, and second, if it is possible to establish that a public building belonged to a chiefdom-level society.

Flannery (1998:21) has argued that in chiefdom-level societies it is not possible to distinguish between elite houses and commoners' houses because chiefs do not have enough power to organize labor to build their residences, so elite houses and non-elite houses have the same characteristics. However, as Blake (1991:28) has stated, many ethnographically and ethnohistorically documented examples of chiefdoms have showed that the chief's dwellings are usually more sumptuous than residences of nonelite people. For example, the cross-cultural ethnographic and ethnohistoric study of 51 pre-state societies in the Americas carried out by Feinman and Neitzel (1984) substantiates this theory. According to this research, houses of the chiefs can be recognized based on their size, form (decoration, construction materials and style), location and interior furniture (Feinman and Neitzel 1984:57). Feinman and Neitzel (1984) observed great variation in the residential architecture of leaders, from slightly larger houses belonging to Carib chiefs to much larger, elaborately ornamented houses built on higher mounds belonging to Natchez leaders. I argue that these variables - size, form and location - were differently interrelated in each society depending on the nature of the chiefdoms in question.

It is well known that chiefdoms are not a monolithic category (see Feinman and Neitzel 1984; Flannery 1999a). The chiefdom concept has been used to describe several types of societies which have in common the presence of inherited social differentiation. There is a variety of types of chiefdoms and as a result several

classifications or models of chiefdoms have been proposed depending on what variable is taken as the most important. For instance, Flannery makes a distinction between Mesoamerican and Near East chiefdoms based on the manner in which elite expressed rank and status. In Mesoamerica, chiefdoms depended on the “flamboyant use of sumptuary goods, and their use of chiefly warfare to create multivillage polities” (Flannery 1999:44). In contrast, in the Near East, leaders relied more on face-to face alliance building with competitors, and on religious purity, piety and religious knowledge than on the use of sumptuary goods. In chiefdoms from Near East, competition was always present (Flannery 1999a:44).

This model might correspond to Renfrew’s (1974) model in which chiefdoms are divided into individualizing and group-oriented. Those types of societies were recognized as relatively similar in overall sociopolitical complexity, but organized in markedly different ways. In that sense Renfrew’s model is analogous to the dual-processual model of political integration proposed by Blanton et al. (1996; Feinman 2001). According to Blanton et al.’s model (1996), political actors can make use of different strategies that can be broken down according to the type of power strategy (exclusionary or corporate) and the source of power (objective or symbolic). One important point is that there may be societies employing exclusionary or corporate strategies at each different level of sociopolitical complexity. This means that these organizational modes are not exclusive to state-level or chiefdom-level societies.

Individualizing chiefdoms used an exclusionary or network strategy in which specific political actors worked to develop a political system built around their monopolistic control of objective sources of power, which include wealth and factors of

production (Blanton et al. 1996). These political actors were associated with autonomous polities linked by trade of prestige goods, war, and the strategic marriages of rulers in large interactive networks (Blanton et al. 1996). Finally, because specific individuals were differentiated and privileged, the differences of rank were exteriorized through the use of sumptuary or luxury goods, special housing, and/or burials monuments. Communal ritual and public construction appear to have had lesser roles (Renfrew 1974).

In Mesoamerica, the site of Paso de la Amada located in the Soconusco region has been considered as an example of this type of chiefdom during the Locona phase (1400-1250 BC) (Rosenswing 2000). At this site, elite residences were built on platforms, while non-elite residences lacked platforms. Moreover, these elite residences varied in size and elaboration of their platforms. Thus the biggest structure, Mound 6, has been described as the chief's house, while Mounds 4, 13 and 32, the smaller platforms, are just elite residences (Blake et al. 2006; Rosenswing 2000).

In brief, in individualizing chiefdoms with exclusionary or network strategies of political integration, there is a great emphasis on the individual. This translates into archaeological correlates that emphasize the individual, such as prestige goods obtained through exchange, power accumulation, large burials, and the specialized manufacture of status-related craft goods (Feinman 2001:160). Most importantly, we should find a marked differentiation among elite and non-elite houses. Houses of the chiefs are larger and different in form (material of construction, style, ornamentation and/or shape of the building) than the commoners' houses. Location regarding the public buildings might play an important role too. Moreover, the amount of these structures should have been a

few (Blake et al. 2006:194).

In contrast to individualized chiefdoms, group-oriented chiefdoms relied on corporate strategies of political integration. Group definition was important because power was shared across different groups and sectors of society. The distribution of power was structured, determined, legitimated and controlled within the limits set by the prevailing corporate cognitive code or knowledge, which included religion and ritual (Blanton et al. 1996). Elite residences and burials were not very different from the rest of the population because these polities deemphasized differences in access to personal wealth. Rather, communal activities and group rituals were of great importance in chiefdoms of this kind. As a result, these chiefdoms privileged monumental public and collective labor (Renfrew 1974).

During its San José (1150-850BC) phase, the site of San José Mogote located in Valley of Oaxaca is an example of this category of chiefdom (Rosenswing 2000). At this time, modest status differences were observable in residential architecture with some houses raised on platforms about one meter high (Drennan 1991:268). However, there was a continuum in social status from elite to non-elite residences, from well-made and whitewashed residences to simple, clay-plastered houses (Flannery and Marcus 2005:11). This suggests that hierarchy was not emphasized through this form of material culture. During this time, public buildings were raised on one-meter platforms and may have been arranged around plazas; through them the strategies of integration were reinforced (Drennan 1991:268). The case of the Trobriand Islanders (Johnson and Earle 2000) is an ethnographically documented example of this kind of chiefdom. The house of the chief is similar to other residences but larger, and is located at the edge of

the central dance ground – the public area – where it appears to dominate the group activities of the village (Johnson and Earle 2000:273). Tahitians represent another example of this type of chiefdom where the houses of the chiefs are differentiated by size (Watson 1994:128).

In short, group-oriented chiefdoms employing corporate strategies of political integration do not display intense social differentiation through residences. All the houses - even the houses of the chiefs - are the same form, although differences in size might be present. Houses of the chiefs may also be differentiated by their location as they may be located near to the public buildings. There could be a continuum in the differentiation of houses, or several houses may be classified as belonging to an elite few. The community's labor is focused mainly on public buildings related to communal ritual, as well as large cooperative labor tasks. Despite the presence of large architectural spaces, individuals are anonymous in the archaeological record (Feinman 2001).

We have to take into consideration that a political system may not be completely exclusionary or corporate because corporate and network strategies are not mutually exclusive. In fact, Feinman (2001) argues that these strategies coexist in the political dynamics of all the arrangements. As a consequence, empirical variation along the corporate-exclusionary dimension is continuous. However, because those strategies are structurally antagonistic, their relative significance may vary cross-culturally or in a single region over time.

The dichotomy can also be considered to reflect simple and complex chiefdoms. For example, a complete range of systems of social stratification and political



development has been described for chiefdoms in Polynesia (Kirch 1984:35). One extreme, the simple chiefdom, is represented by Pukapukans, who classified themselves into two status levels, chiefs and non-chiefs. The chief was holy and represented the people in rituals to the gods. However, he did not have elaborate taboos or symbols of office that separated him from other members of the group. In fact, his house was of the same type as others. The chiefdom of Futuna, also in Polynesia, represents the other extreme. In this society the social ranks are more clearly distinguished and elaborated. In this case, a clear paramount chief existed, as well as lineage chiefs. Symbols of rank were well developed and the chief's house was larger, and set off from the homes of commoners in a prominent position facing the village plaza.

When dealing with elite residences, whether in individualizing, group-oriented, simple or complex chiefdoms, we should find evidence of at least the same range of household activities as in lower-status residences. This means we should demonstrate that buildings were residences where males and females carried out domestic activities.

In contrast, public buildings should have evidence of specialized, non-domestic activities that were exclusive of those buildings. Marcus and Flannery (1996:91) have proposed attributes that can help to identify public buildings in Mesoamerica. According to them, public buildings are usually built on the highest places and they have subfloor dedicatory offerings, as a common feature. Additionally, it is not unusual for this type of buildings to be rebuilt several times in the same place and following the same orientation. Still, the main architectural characteristics of a public building depend on its specific functions (Blake 1991:30). In theory, those functions would be related to the activities performed by chiefs.

According to Feinman and Neitzel (1984:50) the leaders of pre-state societies carried out a variety of functions that can be classified as redistributive (distribution of goods, storage, tribute collection, organization of feasts, supporting of the poor), ideological (sponsoring of ceremonies, acting as guardians of public morality), administrative (leading public meetings, appointing officials, supervising community tasks), judicial (adjudication of disputes, punishment of offenders), subsistence, inter-village (controlling trade, making declarations of war, building alliances and hosting guests) and storage of information concerning territorial boundaries and genealogical histories. Some of these activities should have been performed in public buildings as well as other public facilities such as open spaces (Blake et al. 2006:193). In Mesoamerica, temples, men's houses, ball courts and dance platforms were among the public buildings identified in the chiefdom level, although none of them were exclusive of this level of social complexity.

Communal men's houses were built by cooperative groups for religious rituals, periodic feasting, and large public gatherings. According to Blake (1991) the men's houses tend to be larger than the average residence in the site because they must accommodate large numbers of people. However, they may not differ structurally from ordinary residences. With regards to the activity pattern, they may differ considerably from residences in terms of the activities and tools that occur in them, which must be male-focused. A word of caution about men's houses: these structures have been identified in the Valley of Oaxaca in polities at the level of chiefdom, but they are considered the remnants of a previous stage of sociopolitical complexity. In fact, communal men's houses are typical of segmentary societies (Blake 1991; Flannery and

Marcus 2005). That is, they are public buildings of sedentary egalitarian societies that were lead by adult men who passed through multiple rituals on their way to achieving high status (Flannery and Marcus 2005).

According to Flannery and Marcus (2005), temples started to be built when social complexity emerged, at least in the Valley of Oaxaca. In fact, Flannery and Marcus associate the construction of temples with the emergence of complex chiefdoms. Architectural attributes of temples may vary according to the region or even the site in question. However, Mesoamerican archaeologists have developed formal criteria for the recognition of temples or ceremonial buildings in the archaeological record. Following to Becker (1971), Leventhal (1983) and Marcus (1978), several formal criteria are recognized (Brown and Sheets 2000).

Ceremonial buildings have a special location - they were often positioned in the eastern side of the plaza and located within the highest points (Becker 1971; Brown and Sheets 2000). Likewise they have a formalized building plan, which consists of an open antechamber with restricted access to the innermost rooms (Marcus 1978). Ceremonial structures also tend to be rebuilt several times in the same place and following the same orientation (Marcus and Flannery 1996). Additionally, ceremonial buildings are characterized by taller subplatforms, with less usable surface area, when compared to domestic structures (Becker 1971). They are also characterized by increasing floor elevation. That is, these structures have increasing floor elevations as one proceeds from the antechamber deeper inside of the structure (Marcus 1978). In some cases, an elaborate construction technique rather than subplatform height could be used for inferring a ritual function (Leventhal 1983). As a final point, ceremonial buildings are

characterized by the presence of subfloor caches and burials (Marcus and Flannery 1996).

Dance platforms and ball courts were special types of religious or ceremonial buildings. In Mesoamerica, the ball game was a complex political, ritual, and perhaps economic system. The meaning, importance, morphology and iconography of the ball court varied across space and over the time. However, ball courts have an intrinsic unity, which was manifested in the techniques of the game (see Taladoire 2000:23-24), as well as in certain architectural features. Architecturally, ball courts are characterized by two long, parallel and narrow buildings separated by a long, narrow flat space. Each range structure is composed of a wall in *talud* topped by a cornice. In its inferior section, the *talud* ended directly on the court or on a low bench (Taladoire 2000:24).

Dance platforms are another type of ceremonial structure. Architecturally these structures are very well defined as circular platforms with a keyhole shape. They have been observed mainly in Belize and it has been proposed that their function was related to ceremonial activities conducted by emergent or consolidating elites who were trying to obtain and maintain power (Hendon 1999, 2000).

One point to take into consideration is that in order to identify a chiefdom-level society we should be able to distinguish public buildings, and there should be some differentiation between elite houses and commoners' houses. We cannot infer the presence of chiefdom-level sociopolitical organization solely from the presence of public buildings because public buildings are also present in egalitarian societies. However, public buildings in chiefdom-level societies might be more elaborate than those in egalitarian societies and might have more specialized functions. The regional

context must also be taken into consideration to support the hypothesis of the presence of a chiefdom society. That is, we must establish that there are three levels settlement pattern hierarchy, which signify two levels in the decision-making hierarchy (Earle 2002:54; see Wright 1984).

In summary, architecture of power is used as a means to express asymmetrical social relations. As social relations of power change, the characteristics of architecture of power change. In this sense, through study of the architecture of power we can obtain information about the scale of sociopolitical complexity (see Feinman 1991). This argument is deeply relevant to the discussion of the level of political complexity that was held by the latter Middle Preclassic communities in northern Yucatan, Mexico. Some Mayan archaeologists (Anderson 2005; Gallareta Negrón et al. 2005) have argued that the available information from several sites dating to the Middle Preclassic period indicates a centralized-hierarchical organization that resembles a chiefdom organization. In contrast, other scholars argue that during the last half of the Middle Preclassic period there was a coercive-centralized government or an archaic state (Robles Castellanos 2004). I argue that through the examination of public architecture of a small site near Mérida, Yucatán, México we can test these models of political organization.

## **2. PRECLASSIC EVIDENCE FROM THE NORTHERN MAYA LOWLANDS**

### **2.1 Introduction**

The Preclassic period in Mesoamerica has been divided into three eras, the Early Preclassic (approximately 2000–1000 BC), the Middle Preclassic period (approximately 1000-400/300 BC) and the Late Preclassic (approximately 400/300BC–AD250). The Early Preclassic saw the origins of agriculture and the first settled communities. In some areas, the first complex societies also emerged during this period. Evidence recovered in the Valley of Oaxaca, the Soconusco region and the Basin of Mexico has suggested the presence of chiefdom societies (Feinman 2001; Flannery and Marcus 2005; Hansen and Clark 2001). At least in the Valley of Oaxaca, state-level societies emerged during the Middle Preclassic period. In other areas of Mesoamerica, social and political complexity remained at the level of chiefdom throughout this period. This process resulted in the formalization of diverse cultural manifestations. The Olmec civilization and the Maya culture are instances of these manifestations (see Clark and Hansen 2001:2, Figure 1.1).

From the point of view of the traditional model, the emergence of social and political complexity in Maya Area started in the southern Maya lowlands during the Middle Preclassic (i.e. the Mirador Basin in Guatemala; Figure 2.1). The northern Maya lowlands region is considered to be a peripheral area according to this model. In fact, this view holds that northern and central Yucatan were lightly inhabited during the Middle Preclassic period with simple, dispersed and small farming hamlets characterized by the segmentary tribal level of social organization and without public architecture (Andrews and Robles 2004; Ball 1977). According to the traditional model,

the process of transition to the chiefdom level happened between 350 BC and AD 150 that corresponds to the Late Preclassic period (Ball 1977). This process was the result of influences from the southern Maya lowlands (Robles Castellanos 2004).

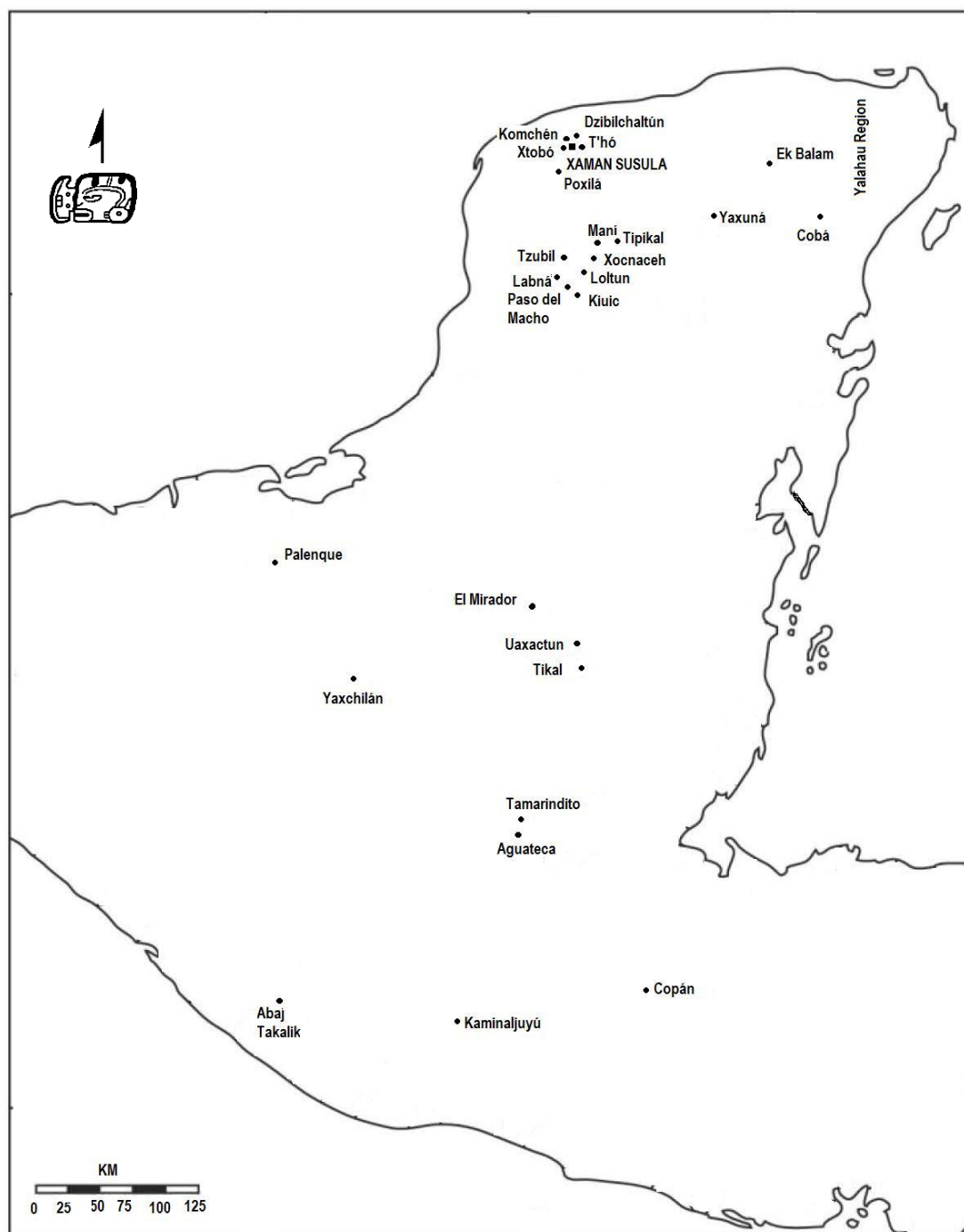


Figure 2.1. Location of the Maya sites mentioned in the text.

This model of emergence of social complexity in the northern Maya Lowlands during Late Preclassic was corroborated by explorations conducted at Dzibilchaltún and Komchén, archaeological sites located 12 km north of Mérida. Explorations conducted by the Dzibilchaltún project (Andrews IV and Andrews V 1980) uncovered evidence suggesting that the Mirador Group was the center of a small village dating to the Middle Preclassic period. The Komchén and Xculul Groups also had Middle Preclassic materials but these groups were primarily dated to the Late Preclassic period.

Based on this evidence, E. Wyllys Andrews V decided to conduct explorations at Komchén in 1980, which provided evidence that this site was a large Late Preclassic community covering at least two square kilometers with a population of up to 3000 people (Ringle and Andrews V 1990). Moreover, it was shown that Komchén had a substantial monumental core and that some of its buildings had a public function including several instances of major ceremonial architecture (Andrews V et al. 1980). The size and complexity of the site suggest that Komchén was at the top of a three-tiered regional settlement hierarchy (Ringle 1985:226). The Middle Preclassic occupation of the surrounding area consisted of small villages characterized by weak sociocultural integration (Andrews V 1981: 320; 1986: 41). Since the work of Andrews V in the Komchén area, our perspective of the nature of the Preclassic occupations in the northern lowlands has changed.

The numerous explorations in the northern lowlands that have taken place in the last few years have confirmed that the first occupations in the area date as early as the second half of the Middle Preclassic period (approximately 700-400/300 BC). Archaeologically speaking, these occupations are defined by the early phase of the



Nabanché ceramic tradition, which can be recognized by the presence of the Joventud, Chunhinta, Dzudzuquil and Achiotes group pottery (Ceballos Gallareta and Robles Castellanos 2009). Recently, Ceballos Gallareta and Robles Castellanos (2009) have claimed that the beginnings of the Nabanché ceramic tradition can be dated as early as 1000 BC. This hypothesis was proposed on the basis of 16 calibrated radiocarbon dates. These ceramic groups persisted until the late phase of the Nabanche period that corresponds to the Late Preclassic period, although new ceramic groups were integrated, such as the Xanabá, Polvero, Tamanché and Sierra groups. The Xanabá group is recognized as the marker for the Late Preclassic period (Ceballos Gallareta and Robles Castellanos 2009).

These recent explorations have changed our understanding of the scale and nature of complexity of the societies that inhabited the northern Maya lowlands during the Middle Preclassic period. Archaeological explorations have revealed that in the northern Maya lowlands the process of emergence of the first complex societies began as early as the second half of the Middle Preclassic period. Therefore, this emergence occurred simultaneously in the northern lowlands and in other Mesoamerican regions. This tradition lasted until the first half of the Late Preclassic when many sites collapsed and were abandoned. The causes of this political breakdown are unknown. Nowadays, the discussion is centered on the scale and nature of political complexity that Middle Preclassic communities held – chiefdom or state level.

Further study of the Preclassic period in the northern Maya lowlands is necessary in order to understand more fully the nature of social and political complexity in the societies of this period. The next section presents the most recent Preclassic

evidence that challenges the traditional perspective about the nature of political organization in the northern Maya lowlands during the Middle Preclassic period.

## **2.2 Evidence of Preclassic occupations in northern Maya lowlands**

In the last few years, our understanding of the Preclassic occupation in the northern Maya lowlands has considerably increased. We are starting to realize the true extent and diversity of this phase of occupation. This increased understanding has been a result of the work of several projects in the different regions (i.e. Puuc, northwest, northeast, Yalahau), which have brought to light hundreds of sites dating to this period (Anderson 2009b). These discoveries represent significant evidence of Middle Preclassic settlements apart from the Dzibilchaltún Mirador group, and have changed researchers' perceptions of the nature of the Preclassic occupations in the northern Maya lowlands.

The Puuc region, for example, has now been demonstrated to have been occupied beginning in the Middle Preclassic period, even though this region was traditionally considered a marginal area whose occupation occurred almost exclusively during the Late Classic to Terminal Classic periods. Although the Puuc sites of Huntichmul (May Ciau et al. 2006), Kiuic (May Ciau et al. 2006) and Labná (Gallareta Negrón et al. 2002; May Ciau et al. 2006) are primarily Classic sites, recent explorations have reported Middle Preclassic and Late Preclassic constructions beneath the Classic buildings. It is likely that many principal Puuc sites had similar occupational histories that began in the Middle Preclassic and continued throughout the following periods. In fact, explorations at the Classic Puuc site of Kiuic have shown that the

original architectonic core of this site, the Plaza Dzunun at the Yaxche Group, was built during the Middle Preclassic period and occupation continued in the Late Preclassic, although construction activities were mainly renovations of Middle Preclassic constructions (May Ciau et al. 2006; see Gallareta Negrón et al 2003). Additionally, excavations at Loltun Cave (González Licón 1986; Robles Castellanos 1997), Maní Cenote (Boucher 1991), Tipikal (Peraza Lope et al. 2002) and Tzubil (Boucher and Palomo 2005) have reported Middle Preclassic and Late Preclassic materials. Also, several explorations have discovered sites with only Preclassic occupations, such as Paso del Macho.

Paso del Macho is a middle rank site located in the Puuc region that consists of a plaza measuring 30 by 45 meters surrounded by twelve buildings. A triadic platform forms the western end of the compound while the opposite side consists of a ball court (Gallareta Negrón and Ringle 2004; May Ciau et al. 2006). Explorations have provided evidence that Paso del Macho was a Preclassic site and according to Gallareta Negrón and Ringle (2004), it was the first Puuc site with such a layout. Paso del Macho's architectural arrangement is very similar to that reported for the Preclassic site of Benatunas, another middle rank site located in northwestern Yucatan (Anderson 2005; Andrews and Robles Castellanos 2004). The repetition of this pattern in several additional sites may suggest that this was a site plan typical of the Middle Preclassic to Late Preclassic transition. Paso del Macho was apparently contemporaneous with Xocnaceh as its most important construction stage was during the first half of the Late Preclassic (Gallareta Negrón and Ringle 2004; May Ciau et al. 2006).

Xocnaceh has proven to have the most impressive monumental architecture of

any site in the Middle Preclassic period, including the largest Middle Preclassic structure known in the northern lowlands (Gallareta Negrón and Ringle 2004). This structure is an acropolis that has been labeled Grupo 1. It consists of a basal platform that measures approximately 150 meters along each side and stands 8.5 meters above the surface. This basal platform supports eight buildings that define a plaza, the Gran Plaza. The most important buildings are arranged in a triadic pattern, and the tallest of these rises more than 20 meters above ground level. This acropolis reached its maximum size during the Middle Preclassic to the Late Preclassic period transition. In fact, this period represents the peak of construction activity of the community, although it is possible that the occupation continued during the first half of the Late Preclassic period. By the close of the first part of the Late Preclassic, the entire site seems to have been abandoned (Gallareta Negrón 2005; Gallareta Negrón and Ringle 2004; May Ciau et al. 2006).

Middle Preclassic occupation has also been documented at another site located in the northern foothills of the Sierrita Puuc, the site of Poxilá (Figure 2.2). The architectural core of Poxilá consists of several platforms and low mounds scattered in a radius of 600 meters (Robles Castellanos et al. 2006). The site's main construction, Structure 1, consists of a basal platform that stands 2.5 meters high and measures 100 meters east-west by 90 meters north-south. This platform forms an acropolis with a structure on its northern side, another platform which measures 40 meters east-west by 80 meters north-south and rises an additional 10 meters above the basal platform surface (Robles Castellanos et al. 2006).

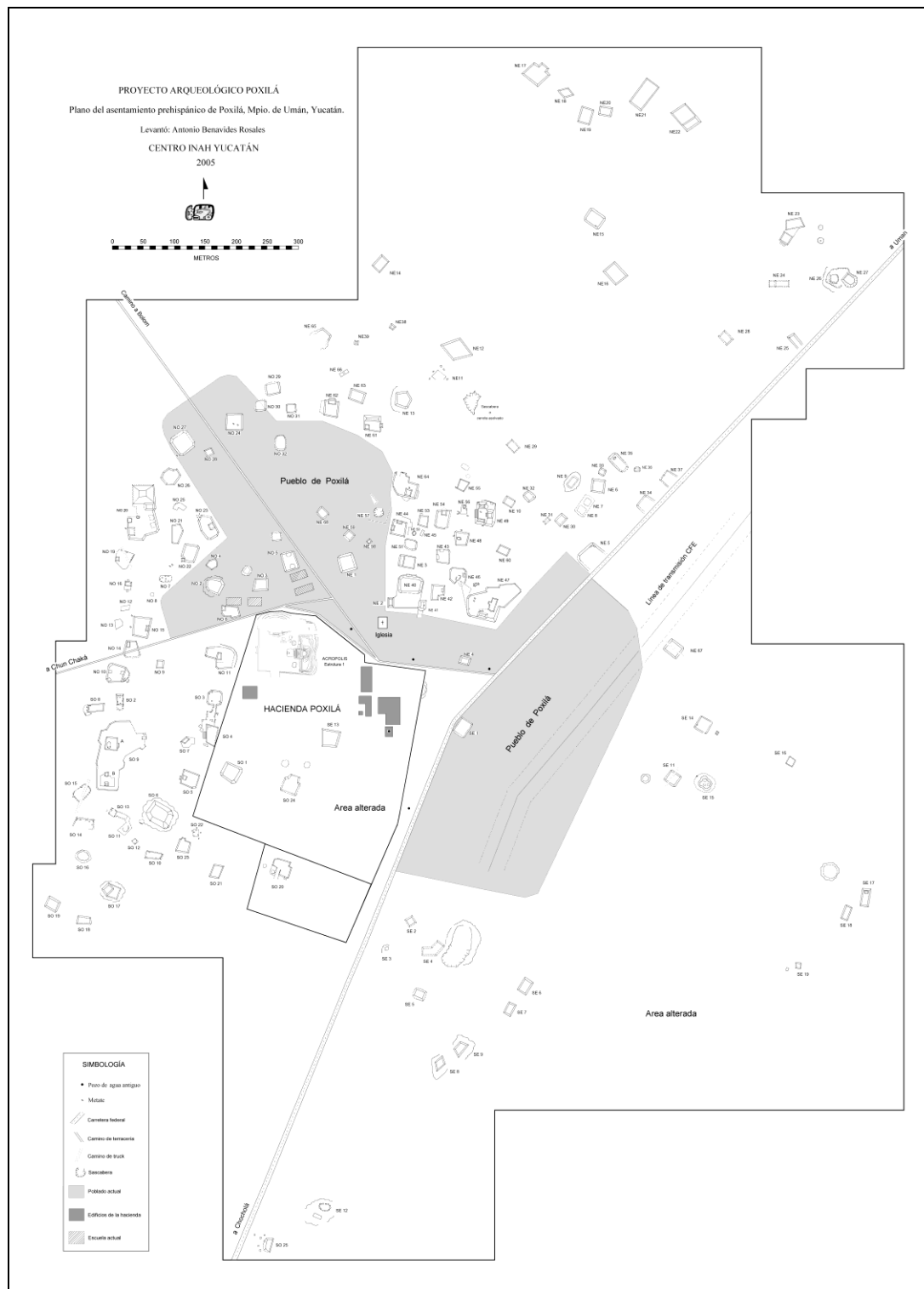


Figure 2.2. Map of Poxilá, Yucatán (after Robles Castellanos et al. 2006).

Explorations of the structure have revealed that its various construction phases date almost exclusively to the second half of the Middle Formative period (Robles Castellanos et al. 2006). According to Robles Castellanos et al. (2006), Poxilá was abandoned at the beginning of the Late Preclassic. Another important piece of data from Poxilá is that its construction techniques and architectural decoration are similar to those described for Xocnaceh. This might mean that both sites were part of the same cultural sphere.

Gallareta Negrón et al. (2005) have pointed out that the Middle Preclassic to Late Preclassic transition was when occupations peaked at sites in the Puuc region. Occupation of these sites continued until the end of the first half of the Late Preclassic, when most of the sites were abandoned. The second half of the Late Preclassic saw an increase in population and the emergence of new sites.

In the northeast region, significant amounts of Middle Preclassic and Late Preclassic ceramic have been recovered at Yaxuná (Stanton and Ardren 2005; Suhler et al. 1998; Figure 2.3). Excavations have revealed that many of the structures integrated into the monumental core have Preclassic-phase constructions, and the data even suggests that the monumental core was already well established in the Preclassic period (Stanton and Ardren 2005:216, 217). The 5E-19 Group and the 6E-30 Group, both located in the site center, contained substantial Middle Preclassic ceramics. The 5E-10 Group is a basal platform supporting a six-meter-tall pyramid and two small flanking structures (Stanton and Ardren 2005:217). The 6E-30 Group appears to have been a high-status residential group, perhaps associated with the 5E-19 Group (Stanton and Ardren 2005:217). Even Sacbe 6, which runs almost due north from the 6E-30 Group,

might be dated to the Middle Preclassic period (Stanton 2005). Occupation at Yaxuná continued during the Late Preclassic period and beyond (Stanton and Ardren 2005:217).

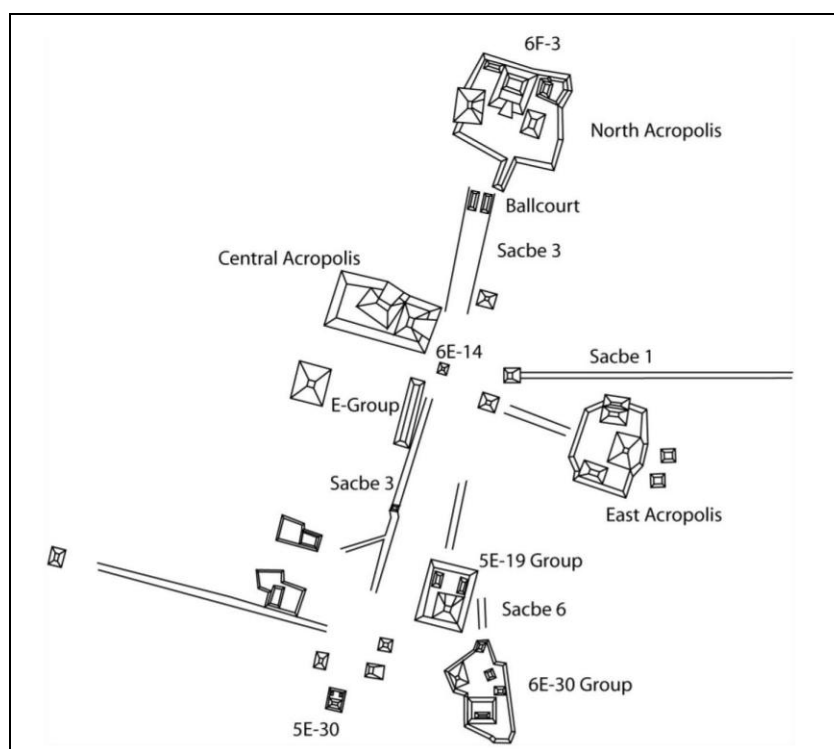


Figure 2.3. Map of Yaxuná, Yucatán (after Stanton and Ardren 2005).

The Yalahau region apparently was also settled beginning in the second half of the Middle Preclassic period and continuing throughout the following periods. For example, the sites of Ox Mul, Kimin Yuk, Tres Lagunas, Arizona, Nohoch Pich, Victoria, sites No. 15, 17, 19 and 25 and Aktun Toh, Aktun Pak Chen and Aktun Pech caves have all provided Middle Preclassic ceramics (Rissolo and Amador 2004). Besides those sites, the Classic sites of Ek Balam (Bey et al. 1998) and Cobá (Robles Castellanos 1990) also provide evidence of Middle Preclassic and Late Preclassic materials, although these occupations are poorly understood.

Perhaps the most important contribution to our knowledge of the Preclassic in northern Yucatan has been made by the Costa Maya Project (Figure 2.4). This project

was directed by Fernando Robles Castellanos and Anthony Andrews (2000, 2001, 2003) from 1999 to 2003 and basically consisted of field reconnaissance of northwest Yucatan with the goal of identifying archaeological and historical sites. The Costa Maya Project's team found evidence of substantial occupation in the northwest Yucatan during the Preclassic period. 116 sites were occupied during the Middle Preclassic period and 92 were occupied during the Late Preclassic. 67 sites were continually occupied throughout the entire period (Andrews and Robles Castellanos 2004:8).

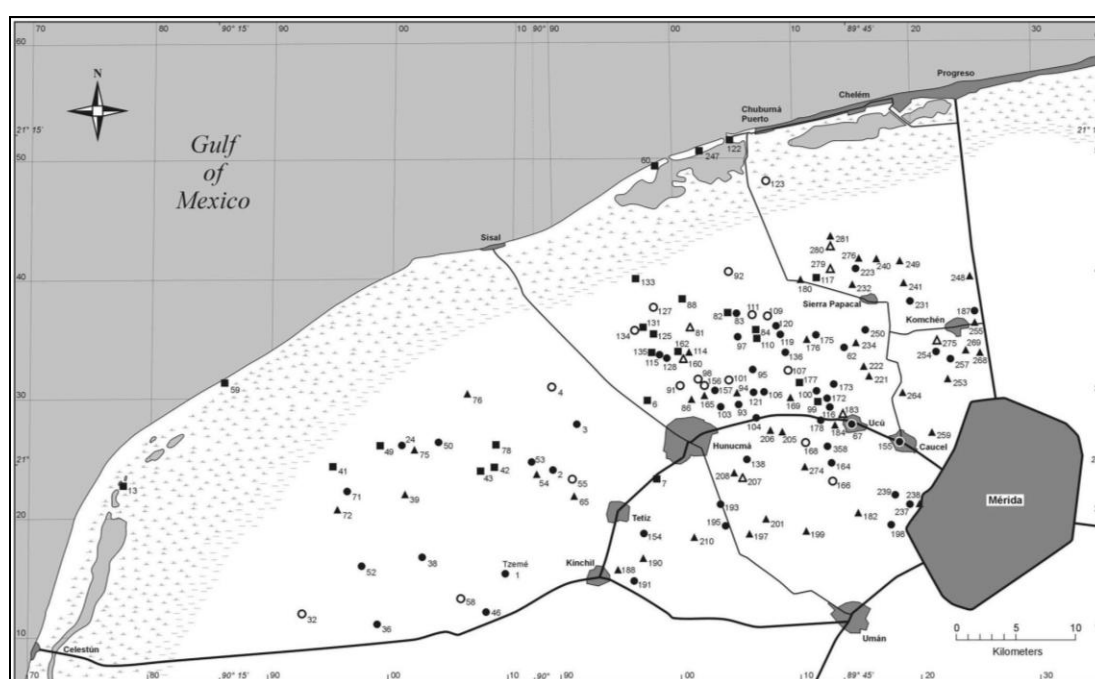


Figure 2.4. Map of northwestern Yucatan showing the Middle and Late Preclassic sites. Middle Preclassic sites are represented as triangles, Late Preclassic sites are shown as squares. Middle and Late Preclassic sites are represented as circles (after Anderson 2005).

One of the most important contributions of the Costa Maya project has been their conclusive evidence that the Middle Preclassic occupation of the northern Yucatan was not a simple dispersal of small farming hamlets. Instead, the Middle Preclassic period was characterized by a variety of settlements of differing levels of complexity.



Sites ranged in size from hamlets with a few scattered mounds to large settlements with formal architecture around plazas (Anderson 2009b; Andrews and Robles Castellanos 2004:8). Moreover, 23 ball courts dating to the Middle Preclassic were recorded. These were always located near the centers of the settlements, often near small acropolis, and had a standard north-south alignment (Andrews and Robles Castellanos 2004:8).

The Costa Maya project's data regarding the density of occupation in the northwest Yucatan during the Middle Preclassic has been corroborated by a program of salvage projects conducted by the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia in several sites in northwest Yucatan. The sites of Serapio Rendón (Hernández Hernández and Ceballos Gallareta 2006), Caucel (Hernández Hernández 2001), Quintas del Mayab (Maldonado Cárdenas and Echeverría Castillo 2004), and El Mameyal (Uriarte Torres and Mier 2004), to name a few of the previously undocumented sites discovered by the INAH salvage program, have also shown Middle Preclassic and Late Preclassic occupations. Even T'hó, the ancient city located at the site of present-day Mérida, had a substantial population during the Middle and Late Preclassic periods (Anderson 2003:46). The most impressive data have come from the Ciudad Caucel Project, through which 208 of the 462 buildings documented at this site have been shown to be Preclassic (Figure 2.5; Uriarte Torres 2006). Through the Costa Maya Project and the various salvage programs, the northwest region is now the most thoroughly documented area in Yucatan, regarding the Preclassic period.

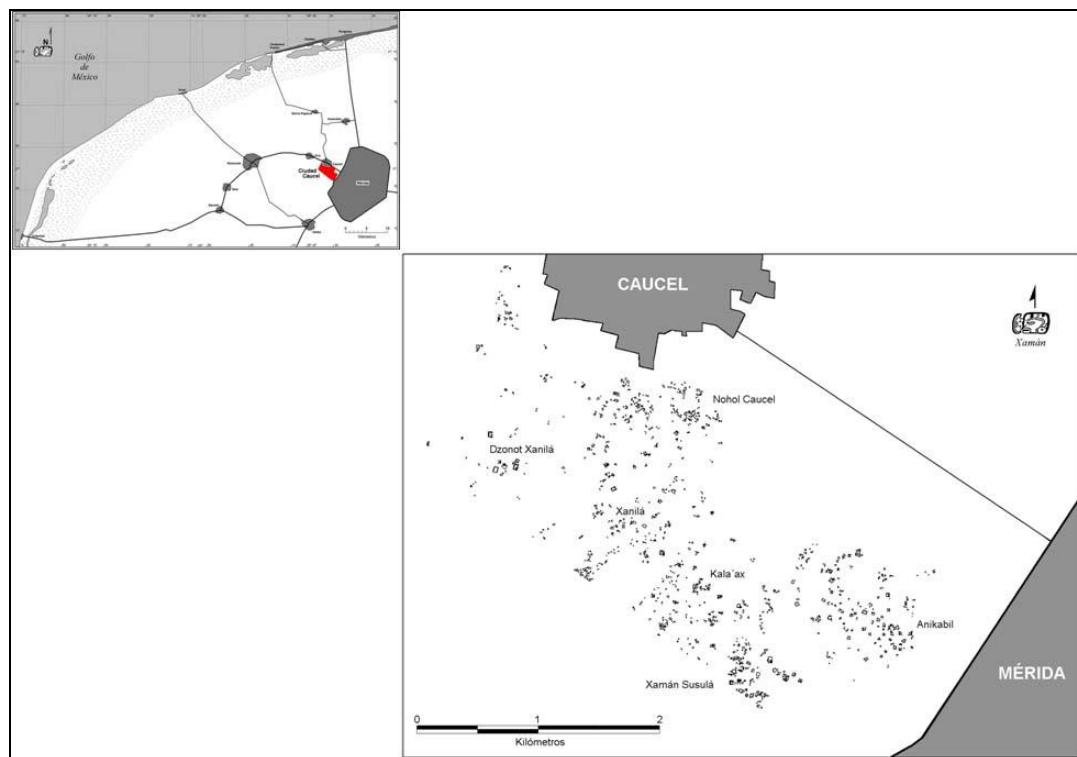


Figure 2.5. Map of Ciudad Caucel.

As a result of these investigations, Xtobó is now recognized as the largest site in the region and might have served as the regional center (Figure 2.6). Xtobó covers an area greater than 1.5 square kilometers and is comprised of 387 structures, resulting in a density of 5.78 structures per hectare (Anderson 2009b). Xtobó's center consists of a well-organized plaza flanked by two eight-meter-tall mounds. This site has a small ball court, Structure 1, which is located immediately to the south of, and partly adjacent to, the plaza (Anderson 2009b; Andrews and Robles Castellanos 2004:8). Radiating out from the plaza are five causeways. The causeway or *sacbe* leading to the north is connected to the residential buildings of several high-status social groups, while the *sacbes* leading to the south connect with a pyramid (Structure 14), a double triadic group (Structure 11) and another triadic group (Structures 19, 39 and 82) (Anderson 2009b).



Based on ceramic evidence from test pits, Anderson (2009b) has suggested that the occupation of the site may have been relatively brief with one principal period of construction during which all the large buildings were built. The focal point of this occupation may have been the transition from the Middle Preclassic to the Late Preclassic period, as at Xocnaceh, Paso del Macho and possibly several sites of northwest Yucatan. Like the Puuc sites, Xtobó was abandoned at some moment in the Late Preclassic period.

After the fall of Xtobó, population in the northwest region decreased, as reflected in the abandonment of the Middle Preclassic sites in the vicinity of Komchén. In fact, this abandonment of Middle Preclassic sites was a result of an important political change which happened in the northwest Yucatan in the second half of the Late Preclassic period: the population became concentrated in new power centers such as Komchén or possibly T'ho (Anderson 2009b). Another important change that occurred during this period was that ball courts were apparently abandoned (Anderson 2003:61). This could have been a symptom of the new political conditions. The Late Preclassic period also saw the emergence of coastal sites, which were practically absent during the Middle Preclassic (Anderson 2003:61). The causes of these political changes are still unknown.

### **2.3 Models of political organization during the Middle and the Late Preclassic periods**

The Middle Preclassic data from the new discoveries in the northern lowlands suggests a substantial sociopolitical stratification beginning in this period, and

intensifying during the Middle Preclassic to Late Preclassic transition. This data challenges the dominant theories concerning the rise of sociopolitical complexity in the Maya area, which privilege the southern lowlands and consider the northern lowlands to be culturally marginal. Several factors justify a reexamination of these theories.

First of all, the existence of high status residences is a classic indicator of stratification in archaeological theory. Second, causeways or *sacbes* also have traditionally been associated with complex Maya social organization. Third, the construction of pyramids and acropolis indicate complex sociopolitical organization because they represent great energy expenditure (Anderson 2005, 2009; Robles Castellanos 2004) and might be indicative of the growing power of emergent elites (Stanton and Ardren 2005:225). The presence of materials clearly obtained through long-distance exchange, including basalt, jade, obsidian and some ceramic groups, may indicate that Middle Preclassic societies participated in interregional exchange networks. Participation in these networks would have required the existence of elites (Robles Castellanos 2004).

In addition to these factors, the similarities in layout between Paso del Macho and contemporary sites from northwest Yucatan as well as the similarities in construction methods and stonework between the acropolis of Xocnaceh and Poxilá suggest that all of these sites shared some aspects of their ideology from the Middle Preclassic onward, and possibly shared a common origin. This new evidence suggests that complex societies in the north had a distinctive local flavor, as indicated by architecture and ceramics, and had public architecture as elaborate, as large, and as early as that from the Southern Lowlands (Gallareta Negrón and Ringle 2004).

Based on the variety and complexity of Middle Preclassic sites, it has been proposed that the three-tiered regional settlement hierarchy was first established during the second half of the Middle Preclassic and persisted throughout the Late Preclassic period (Anderson 2005:18; Andrews and Robles Castellanos 2004:8; Robles Castellanos 2004). At the top of the hierarchy are sites defined by a spatial extent larger than one square kilometer and the presence of monumental architecture in their core (Anderson 2003:49). During the Middle Preclassic period and the first half of the Late Preclassic, Xocnaceh, Poxilá and Xtobó fall in this category (Robles Castellanos 2004). During the second half of the Late Preclassic, Komchén and T'hó are examples of this category (Anderson 2003; Ringley 1985). Middle ranked sites are smaller than one square kilometer in extent, but still have centers identified by nonresidential architecture. This central architecture most frequently consists of substantial pyramidal mounds arranged around formal plazas, and often including ballcourts and small raised plazas with three- to five-meter-tall residential mounds. This type of architectural complex is known as a Chan Acropolis or small acropolis (Anderson 2003:56). The third level in the three-tier settlement hierarchy consists of lesser hamlets with scattered small mounds lacking monumental architecture. (Anderson 2003:60)

The existence of this regional settlement hierarchy is another element that can be used as an indicator of the level of political complexity present in the Middle Preclassic period in the northern Maya lowlands. As Anderson (2005:19) pointed out, the three-tiered hierarchy shows us that a level of complexity existed during this period “that went beyond independent, egalitarian, farming communities.”

Mayan archaeologists still disagree about the level of political organization of

various communities during the second half Middle Preclassic. As a result, therefore, the nature of the transition between Middle Preclassic and Late Preclassic is still a topic of debate as well. For instance, Gallareta Negrón et al. (2005) argue that the monumental constructions at Xocnaceh, Poxilá and Xtobó indicate a centralized-hierarchical organization established near the end of the Middle Preclassic period. However, they believe that more data regarding burials, domestic activities and regional settlement is needed to suggest a chiefdom or archaic state level of complexity. Anderson (2005:19) states that communities in northwest Yucatan closely resemble those of chiefdom-level social complexity, although he notes that there is still insufficient data beyond the general settlement pattern to make a detailed analysis of the region's political or social structure. In contrast, Robles Castellanos (2004) argues that during the latter half of the Middle Preclassic period there was a coercive-centralized government or an archaic state. He bases his hypothesis on regional settlement patterns, the monumental nature of architecture in the main sites, and evidence for long-distance exchange.

Xamán Susulá, a small site near Merida, Yucatán, México, has provided useful data for examining these models of political organization during the Middle Preclassic to Late Preclassic transition. During explorations of this site, we found a peculiar building, Structure 1714, whose unique architectural and functional characteristics allow us to classify it as a public building. This structure is ideal for testing the models of political organization proposed for the Middle Preclassic and Late Preclassic transition.

### 3. STRUCTURE 1714 OF XAMAN SUSULA

#### 3.1 Xamán Susulá

The archaeological site of Xamán Susulá is located on the western border of Merida, Yucatan, Mexico. It is part of the area known as Ciudad Caucel (Figure 3.1). Despite its proximity to the city, Xamán Susulá was not discovered until 2006. Xamán Susulá is a site of interest because of its early occupation and architectural features.

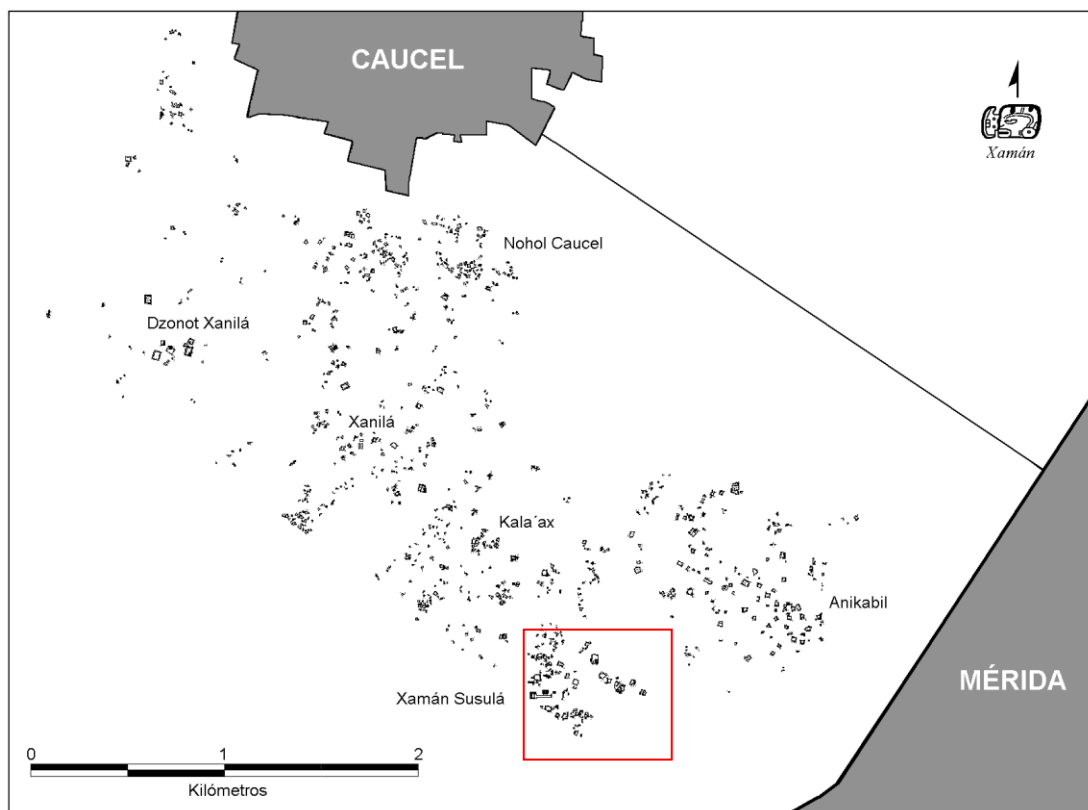


Figure 3.1. Location of Xamán Susulá in Ciudad Caucel (after Ceballos Gallareta and Robles Castellanos 2009.).

Occupation at Xamán Susulá started in the Middle Preclassic period (approximately 800-400/300 BC) at *Chikin* plaza. The peak of construction activity at the site was in the first half of the Late Preclassic period (400/300 BC-AD 250). This



identifies Xamán Susulá as participant in the phenomena occurring during the Middle Preclassic to Late Preclassic transition. During the Early Classic (AD 250-550), structures 1714, 1729 and 1733 underwent architectural modifications during which new structures were built on top of older ones. These architectural modifications were associated with functional changes in the spaces. There is also evidence of certain occupation during the Late and Terminal Classic period (AD 550-1050), although the site was almost abandoned.

Currently, the architectural core of the site consists of two plazas that have been named with the Mayan words *Lak'in* and *Chikín* (Figure 3.2). Each plaza had a small number of structures whose functions are considered to be public. These plazas are linked through Structure 1728, a causeway or *sacbe* oriented on an east-west axis. At the northern terminus of the *sacbe*, at the center of its longitudinal axis, archaeologists located Structure 1729. To the south of the *sacbe* are Structures 1734, 1736, 17137 and 1738, of which at least Structure 1738 had a domestic function. Domestic platforms were identified to the north and the southeast of this architectural core. Structure 1738 was different from the rest of the domestic structures as it was built on a larger platform and it was associated with the site's public architecture. It has been proposed that the entire site covered 0.06 square kilometers and included 105 structures (Uriarte Torres 2006). However, the site could have been larger. A modern limestone quarry was reported immediately at the south of the architectural site.

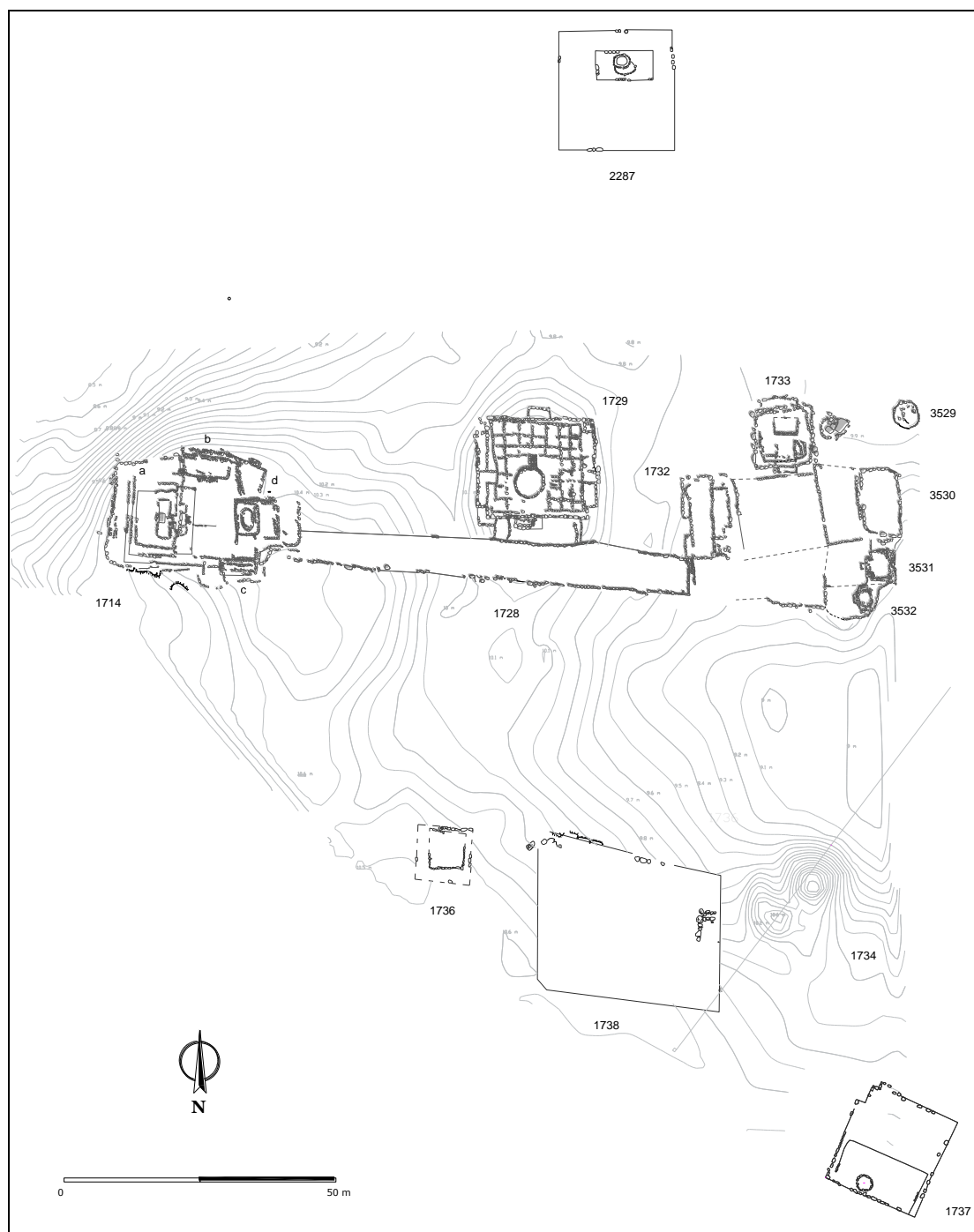


Figure 3.2. Map of Xamán Susulá (Courtesy of Proyecto Arqueológico Xamán Susulá).

Based on the site core's architectural features and extent, as well as the regional settlement pattern, it is likely that Xamán Susulá was a middle ranked site and possibly functioned as an administrative center for the surrounding villages during the Middle Preclassic to Late Preclassic transition (Uriarte Torres 2006). Xamán Susulá may have been under the power of Xtobó, the northwestern regional center during this period. The lack of a ballcourt, characteristic of the middle ranked sites of the Middle Preclassic period, attracts attention. Two explanations are possible. The first possibility is that the limestone quarry could have destroyed a part of the site that contained a ballcourt. However, this hypothesis is not likely because what remains of the southern area is composed primarily of residential structures rather than monumental architecture. The second hypothesis is that, although Xamán Susulá may be a site in the Middle Preclassic tradition, the lack of a ballcourt could reflect the emergent political conditions, which coalesced in the Late Preclassic period. These new political conditions based their power on other elements instead of ballcourts.

In regard to the architectural core's arrangement, the *Lak'in* plaza has an irregularly shaped terrace. The dimensions of this plaza are 30 to 38.50 meters (north-south) by 25.50 to 40.35 meters (east-west). In the northern part, the plaza is delimited by Structure 1733, a square basal platform that measures 8 by 8 meters and stands 1.60 meters high. This platform supported a superstructure. On its eastern side, the plaza is enclosed by Structures 3530, 3531 and 3532, which are three basal platforms, two square and one circular. On its western side, the plaza is delimited by Structure 1732, a T-shaped platform. The causeway starts at the southwest corner of Structure 1732. The *sacbe* functions as the axis of the architectural design of the site and, at the same time,

integrates all the structures of the architectural group. Structure 1729 is located at the middle point of the northern edge of the *sacbe*. This structure is a square platform, 36 meters on each side and 1.70 meters high, which was built to cover a circular platform with talud walls (Structure 1729-sub). To the west, the causeway ends at the *Chikin Plaza* or Structure 1714. This plaza consists of a basal platform that was built by leveling a natural hill. Above this platform, Structures 1714-B, 1714-C and 1714-D were built delimiting an open space or patio. Structure 1714-A encloses the plaza on the west. This structure was looted and destroyed. This modern destruction facilitated the discovery of Structure 1714-Asub, located beneath the fill of Structure 1714-A. The particular architectural features of Structure 1714-Asub make this structure a good media through which to examine the political organization of this site, and perhaps of northern Yucatan.

### **3.2 Structure 1714's construction sequence**

Based on ceramic analysis, it has been possible to establish that the *Chikin Plaza* or Structure 1714 was occupied beginning in the Middle Preclassic period (1000 – 400/300 BC) and continuing through the Early Classic period (AD. 250-600). The peak of construction in this area was during the Middle Preclassic to Late Preclassic period transition. During the Early Classic period the structure was still occupied, but it was abandoned at some moment during this period.

During the Middle Preclassic period, the structure included two units, a basal platform located on the eastern side and two features on the western side (Figure 3.3). These units are the oldest evidence of occupation in the architectural core of Xamán

Susulá. The eastern basal platform measured approximately 23 by 14 meters, although its total dimensions are unknown because the western side was not identified. This platform was built to take advantage of a natural rise that slopes toward the north. The irregularities of the bedrock were filled in in order create a level surface. An important note is that this was the highest area in the architectural core. We were able to detect that the platform retaining walls consisted of two courses of roughly shaped, rectangular stones which rested on a soil-stone base. The entire platform was covered with stucco floor (0.07 meters thick). Access to the platform was not restricted. In fact, in the north side, where the platform wall was highest, a staircase composed of two steps provided access to the platform.

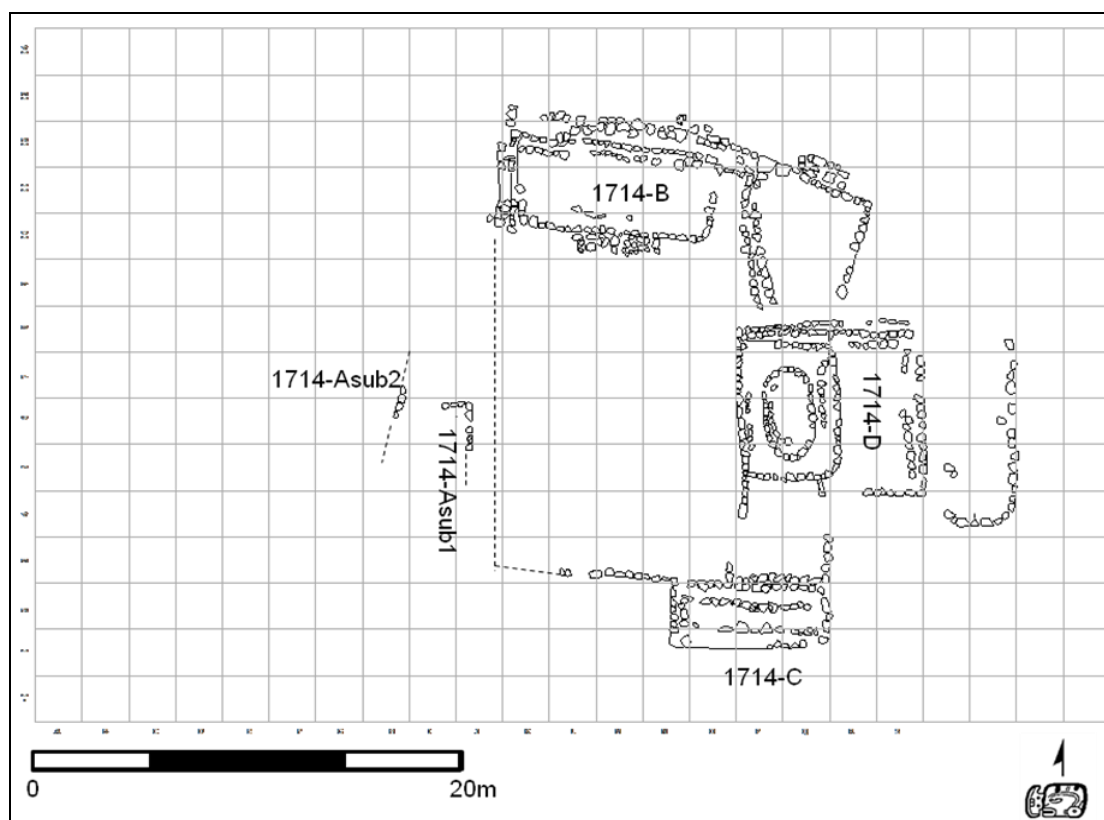


Figure 3.3. Structure 1714 and its Middle Preclassic construction stages (Courtesy of Proyecto Arqueológico Xamán Susulá).

In its earliest stage, this platform supported two rectangular building foundations with rounded corners. Structure 1714-B was located near the northern edge of the platform, while 1714-C constituted the southeastern edge. These structures faced an open space or patio, which was completely covered with stucco floors. In the next phase of remodeling, a small apsidal foundation was added in the eastern side of the platform. This foundation, named Structure 1714-D, was converted into a rectangular building with rounded corners. This rectangular building was extended to the north, south and east, and became a rectangular foundation with squared corners. In order to support this foundation, the original platform was extended to the east by a width of 1.40 to 2.10 meters. Regarding 1714-D's construction system, the three building foundations consisted of a double alignment of stones. Two rows courses of rectangular carved stones were used for the exterior wall, while one row of coarse stones formed the interior wall. The foundations apparently supported perishable superstructures, although no postholes were detected within the double walls themselves.

The characteristics of the western unit are unknown. However, we know that first, the unit consisted of a line of stones, perhaps forming a small rectangular foundation (Structure 1714-Asub2). This feature was covered with a stucco floor which extended 11 meters westward. In order to build this floor, the builders of this feature took advantage of a natural rise that slopes upward to the west and north. The irregularities of the ground were leveled. Above this floor a rectangular structure was built, the dimensions of which are unknown (Structure 1714-Asub1). We were not able to establish the relationship between the eastern and western units. They may have been

independent of one another, although it is difficult to confirm this hypothesis due to the fact that the western features were not totally explored.

During the Middle Preclassic to Late Preclassic transition, when Xamán Susulá reached its peak, Structure 1714 underwent a radical change (Figure 3.4). This moment has been dated by means of a carbon sample, which provided the date of approximately 400 BC (Peniche et al. 2009). The two units built during the Middle Preclassic were integrated to form the larger basal platform that supported Structure 1714-Asub. At some moment during the Late Preclassic period, Structure 1714-Asub was burned, dismantled and, possibly, abandoned. A more detailed description will be given in the next section.

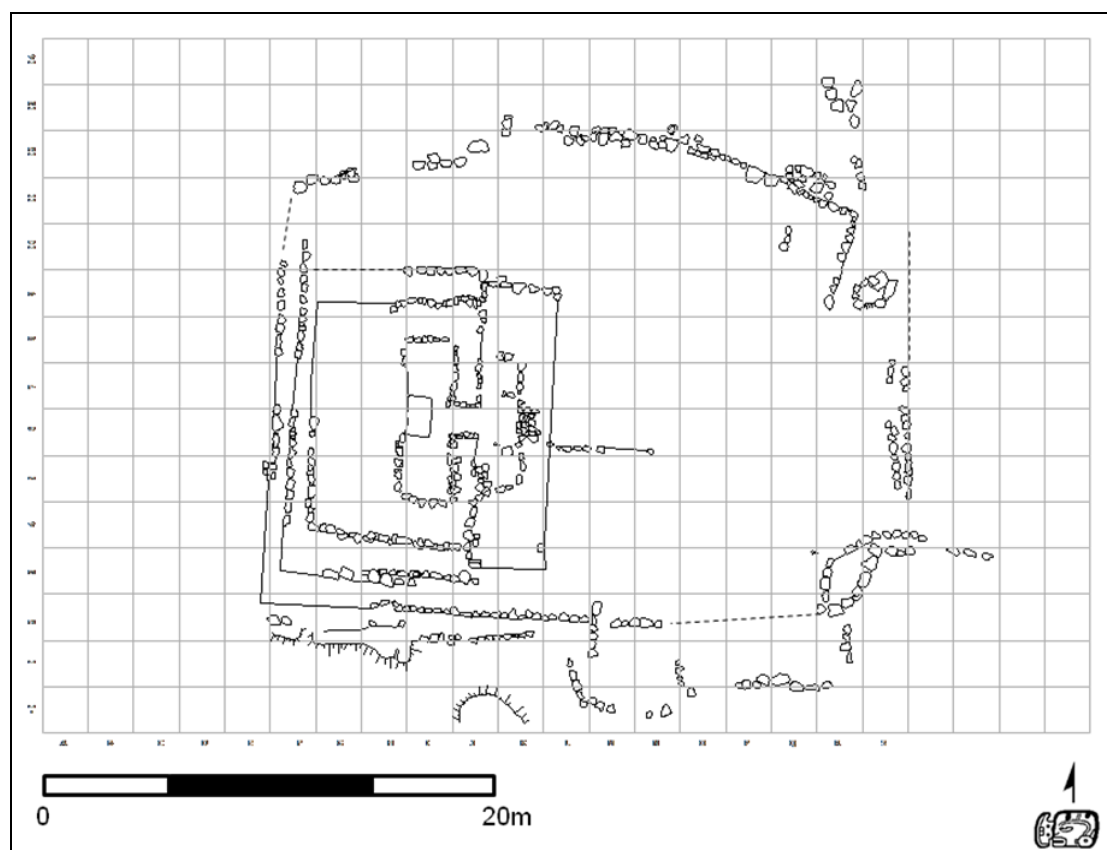


Figura 3.4. Structure 1714. Construction stage dating to the Middle Preclassic to Late Preclassic transition (Courtesy of Proyecto Arqueológico Xamán Susulá).

During the Early Classic period, the structure underwent another construction phase (Figure 3.5). However, the complete nature of this modification is unknown due to the fact that many of its stones were taken by looters, leaving only part of the construction fill. Despite this, it is clear that the basal platform was extended at least 2 meters westward. The extension's corners were also rounded. Furthermore, the platform's level in the west or back side of Structure 1714-Asub was raised at least 0.70 meters above the level of the previous stucco floor. Thus after the construction of the Early Classic facet, the platform in the west side was 1.70 meters high. The eastern open space continued to be used and was not changed. Another feature of this construction phase was a number of stone alignments that were built to the front and sides of Structure 1714-Asub. We think that these alignments were Structure 1714-A's foundations. In contrast to the Preclassic architecture, which was graceful, this construction phase was characterized by the use of roughly shaped, rectangular stones in different sizes. Even the wall of the platform's extension was built with coarse stones.

Finally, at some moment of the Early Classic period, Structure 1714 was completely abandoned. There is evidence that after its abandonment, Structure 1714 underwent some modifications. Modifications dated to this period are related to intrusive burials. The northern wall, near the northwest corner of the basal platform, was dismantled and the construction fill was removed. In this empty space a burial was deposited. The space was then filled with soil and stones. For the purposes of this chapter, I will focus on the description of the basal platform dated to the Middle Preclassic to Late Preclassic transition period.



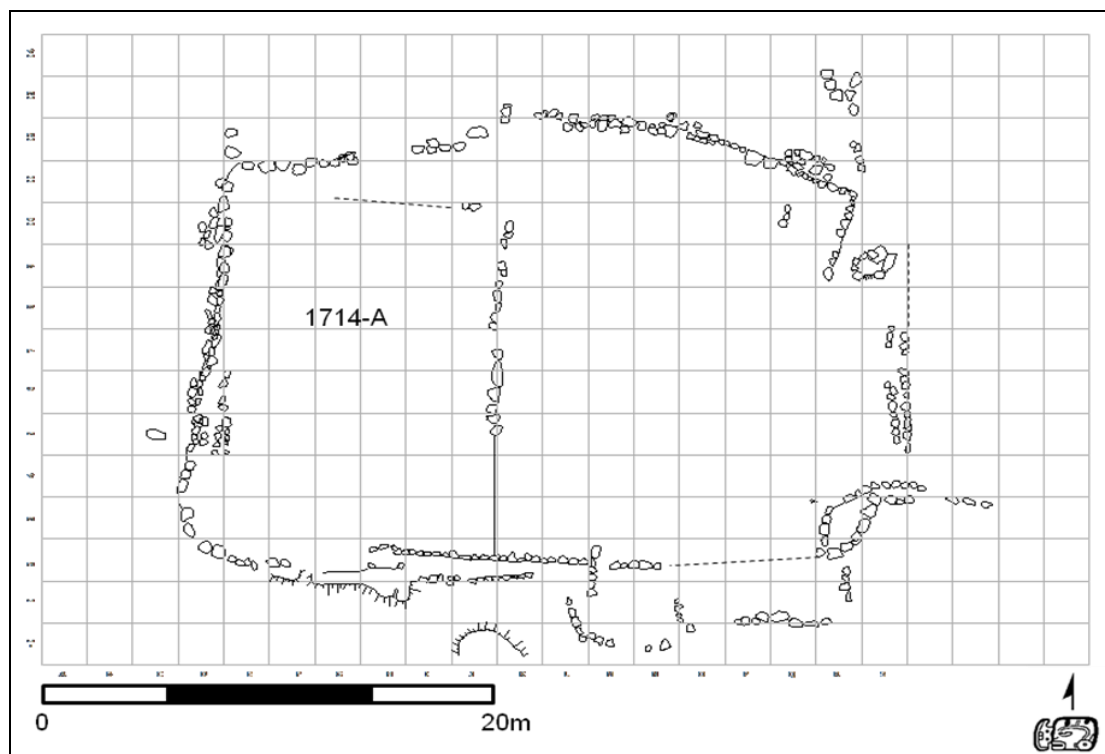


Figure 3.5. Structure 1714 during the Early Classic period (Courtesy of Proyecto Arqueológico Xamán Susulá).

### 3.3 Structure 1714 during the Middle Preclassic to Late Preclassic transition

At the end of the Middle Preclassic or the beginning of the Late Preclassic period, Structure 1714 underwent a huge transformation. The two units built during the Middle Preclassic were integrated to form a single basal platform. This basal platform was rectangular with rounded corners and measured 28 meters long by 23.50 meters wide. Its height ranges from 0.20 to 1.00 meter, depending on the irregularities of the ground. On the southern side, the bedrock is integrated into the platform. The platform's dimensions were reached by the integration of the eastern platform (that was filled to cover the three building foundations) and the stucco floor built during the

second phase of the western feature. The platform retaining walls consisted of rectangular carved stones, bigger than those used in the construction of the previous platform. According to the evidence obtained during the explorations, the entire platform was covered with a stucco floor. The access to this platform was not restricted. People were able to access the platform from almost all approaches except the west and northwest sides due to the height of the walls on these sides. This basal platform was built to support a superstructure, 1714-Asub. This structure stood at the platform's middle point (Figure 3.4).

Structure 1714-Asub consists of a room that faces east, toward the open space created with the fill of the eastern platform to cover the building foundations (Figure 3.6). The building's dimensions are 10.70 meters in the north-south axis by 3.50 meters in the east-west axis, creating an interior space that measures 6.80 meters by 1.80 meters. From the platform floor, this building is 1.50 meters high. The access is located in the central part of the eastern wall and is 1.10 meters wide. Structure 1714-Asub has thick walls (the thickness varies between 1.50 and 2.10 meters) and stepped tiers at the west and south sides. The interior walls, as well as the exterior eastern wall, were built with middle-quality carved rectangular stones. The exterior southern, northern and western walls were constructed with coarse, rectangular stones. The most interesting aspect of the construction system is that Structure 1714-Asub's interior walls were built in the shape of a talud of stepped blocks. Based on the presence of seven posthole traces (two in the eastern wall, one in the western wall and one in each corner of the building), we can suggest that the room's roof was built with perishable materials (Figure 3.7). The room's floor was covered with high-quality stucco and was laid down at the same

level as the floor of the eastern open space. The room's interior walls were also plastered. There are no indications of any other decorative features.



Figure 3.6. Structure 1714-Asub (Courtesy of Proyecto Arqueológico Xamán Susulá).



Figure 3.7. Structure 1714-Asub. Evidence of postholes (Courtesy of Proyecto Arqueológico Xamán Susulá).

The most interesting architectural feature of Structure 1714 or the *Chikin* plaza was encountered inside Structure 1714-Asub. This feature consists of a very well preserved stucco bench (Figure 3.8). This bench is rectangular in shape with rounded corners and measures 1.70 meters long by 1.10 meters wide by 0.24 meters high. The bench was built over the room's stucco floor and is almost attached to the west or back wall, yet between the wall and the bench there is a space of 0.10 meters. This feature is located exactly in the central part of the room facing the central access. The bench is completely covered with stucco, although it lacks further decoration. This bench has been identified as a throne due to its characteristics (see Valdés 2001).



Figure 3.8. Structure 1714-Asub. Central bench or throne inside Structure 1714-Asub's room (Courtesy of Proyecto Arqueológico Xamán Susulá).

The temporality of Structure 1714-Asub and therefore of its throne during the end of the Middle Preclassic and the beginning of the Late Preclassic is very interesting. The earliest thrones in the Maya area have been reported for the Late Preclassic period at Kaminaljuyú and Abaj Takalik. In the Maya lowlands, these features were present in

the latter half of the Early Classic period at Uaxactún (Valdés 2001:153). Thus Xaman Susulá's throne is the first example reported not only in the northern lowlands but in the entire Maya lowland region.

Structure 1714 underwent three remodeling phases. The first modification consisted in the construction of a semi-carved stone alignment located on the platform, outside Structure 1714-Asub. This alignment faces westward and rests on the platform's stucco floor. Four more alignments, two facing north and two facing south, also correspond to this construction stage. The function of these alignments is unclear. During the second phase of remodeling, a bench was attached outside of the eastern wall of Structure 1714-Asub. This bench measures 3.30 meters in the east-west axis by 12 meters in the north-south axis and is 0.26 meters high, measured from the platform's floor. Based on the presence of stucco in some areas, it is likely that this bench was completely plastered. The third modification is related to Structure 1714-Asub's northern and southern walls, where other walls were raised.

At some moment during the Late Preclassic period, Structure 1714-Asub underwent a fire (Figure 3.9). This activity is evidenced by the presence of a burned dark gray soil immediately above the Structure 1714A-sub's stucco floor, as well as the presence of burned wood. It is possible that the burned wood was part of the roof's postholes. Outside this room, burned dark gray soil was present in the northern and western areas. Additionally, the wall stones of the third remodeling phase show whitish fire marks. The back or western wall and the stepped tiers associated with the throne were completely dismantled (Figure 3.10). The interior of the room was filled with stones and the entrance was completely blocked off (Figure 3.11). Likewise, large

ceramic fragments were unearthed just above the Structure 1714-Asub's stucco floor, along with two smoothers that retained small amounts of cinnabar, which were recovered above the throne. All this evidence suggests the possibility that Structure 1714-Asub was the object of a ritual termination. I argue that this event corresponds to the moment of the fall of Xtobó and the changes in political power in the northwestern Yucatan at the end of the first half of the Late Preclassic period.



Figure 3.9. Evidence of fire in Structure 1714-Asub. Above: burned dark gray soil above the Structure 1714-Asub's stucco floor. Below: wall stones of the third remodeling phase showing whitish fire marks (Courtesy of Proyecto Arqueológico Xamán Susulá).



Figure 3.10. West or back side of Structure 1714-Asub showing the dismantled walls (Courtesy of Proyecto Arqueológico Xamán Susulá).



Figure 3.11. Blocked access of Structure 1714-Asub (Courtesy of Proyecto Arqueológico Xamán Susulá).

### 3.4 Relation with other structures of the architectural core

During the transition from the Middle Preclassic to the Late Preclassic period, Xamán Susulá had its construction peak and almost achieved its final arrangement. Xamán Susulá's Preclassic architectural arrangement was very special and it represents a unique case in northern Yucatan. The *sacbe* was built at the end of the Middle Preclassic or the beginning of the Late Preclassic, and served to integrate the architectural core in addition to separating the public and domestic areas. To the south of the *sacbe*, Structures 1736 and 1738 were built. It is possible that Structures 1737 and 1734 also date to this period, but these structures have not yet been explored. Of these, at least Structure 1738 had a domestic function.

The public area of Xamán Susulá consisted of the *Chikin* Plaza to the west and the *Lak'in* Plaza to the east. Structure 1729-Sub, the circular platform, was also part of the architectural core. This platform was very peculiar in style. Its walls had a talud and it had a ramp as an access. Throughout the Maya literature, these structures are considered to be the earliest ritual buildings, especially in Belizean sites (Clark and Hansen 2001; Hendon 1999). Although during the entire Late Preclassic, the *Chikin* plaza consisted solely of the basal platform supporting Structure 1714-Asub, the *Lak'in* plaza underwent a series of construction phases during the end of the Middle Preclassic and the first half of the Late Preclassic period. In its first manifestation, the plaza contained a T-shaped platform (Structure 1732) that delimited the plaza to the west, and also a basal platform with a superstructure (Structure 1733) to the east. In different construction phases, the ancient inhabitants of Xamán Susulá built (2) a rectangular platform (Structure 3530), (3) a small circular foundation (3529) and a rectangular



platform with inside corners (Structure 3531), (4) a circular structure (Structure 3532) and (5) the second architectural phase of Structure 1732. The absence of cultural materials that suggest domestic functions indicates that these structures served special non-domestic functions.

To reiterate, the *Chikin* and *Lak'in* plazas were connected through the 74- by 7.5- meter *sacbe*. In fact, Structure 1714-Asub's throne, the *sacbe* and Structure 3532 were completely aligned. This architectural design allowed a person seated on the Structure 1714-Asub's throne to have a clear view of the platform's open space, the causeway, Structure 1729-sub and the *Lak'in* plaza. Furthermore, people in the platform's open space would have been able to see the Structure 1714-Asub's interior.

### **3.5 Artefactual evidence during the Structure 1714-Asub phase**

During the exploration of Structure 1714-Asub, ceramics dating to the Middle Preclassic to Late Preclassic period were found. These ceramics are temporally correlated with Late Nabanché (approximately 400/300 BC-AD 250). Basically, we unearthed Early Nabanché ceramic groups associated with the Xanabá ceramic group. This temporality is corroborated by the radiocarbon date 2202±20 that corresponds to 400 BC obtained from a sample of burned wood that was possibly originally part of the postholes of the building (Peniche May et al. 2009). The most interesting fact is that ceramics associated with Structure 1714-Asub were very elegant. Very similar ceramics were reported at the sites of Poxilá and Xocnaceh. In these sites, these ceramics were found in the deepest sealed contexts and dated to the Middle Preclassic. The radiocarbon date and the ceramic evidence together suggest that Structure 1714-Asub

was built during the Middle Preclassic – Late Preclassic transition and it was in use during the Late Preclassic.

An offering was found beneath the basal platform's floor, which was deposited during the covering of 1714-Asub1 (rectangular feature) and the construction of 1714-Asub. This offering was located outside Structure 1714-Asub1's northeast corner, exactly where the northern side of the Structure 1714-Asub's access would be built (Figure 3.12). Thus it is likely that this offering may have had a double function. It served as a termination offering for Structure 1714-Asub1, as well as a construction offering for 1714-Asub. The offering was deposited in the basal platform's fill, 0.30 meters beneath its stucco floor and ending 1.00 meter below the stucco floor. The offering consisted of the body of an *olla* from the Saban ceramic group and the neck of another *olla* of the Joventud ceramic group. These pieces were found articulated together as if they were the same vessel. Another possible offering was encountered in Structure 1714-Asub. This possible offering was deposited inside the access's northeast wall, between its stones and consisted of a fragment of a grinding stone or *mano* (Figure 3.13).



Figure 3.12. Offering deposited beneath Structure 1714-Asub's stucco floor and outside Structure 1714-Asub1's northeast corner (Courtesy of Proyecto Arqueológico Xamán Susulá).



Figure 3.13. Offering deposited inside the access's northeast wall of Structure 1714-Asub (Courtesy of Proyecto Arqueológico Xamán Susulá).

In Structure 1714-Asub, small celts manufactured from a green igneous stone were unearthed. Artifacts made of similar raw materials and dating to the Preclassic period were also recovered at Poxilá and Xocnaceh. At Ciudad Caucel, celts of green

igneous stone were unearthed in special structures, such as the Xanilá ballcourt, where five celts were found in the ballcourt marker as an offering. We do not know the provenance of these artifacts. However, it is clear that they were obtained through long-distance exchange (Figure 3.14).



Figure 3.14. Small celts made of green igneous stone recovered during the explorations of Structure 1714-Sub (Courtesy of Proyecto Arqueológico Xamán Susulá).

Other lithic artifacts made of chert and obsidian were recovered during the explorations. 84 chert artifacts were unearthed, of which only 12 were classified as percussion flakes (N=6), thinning flakes (N=2), a macroblade (N=1), a bifacial point (N=1) and a unifacial tool (N=1). As regards the obsidian artifacts, only five fragments of prismatic blades were recovered. The varied nature of the identified artifacts can be translated as a lack of evidence of manufacture activities.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

The main objective of this section is to determine the level of political organization of Xamán Susulá during the Middle Preclassic to the Late Preclassic transition. To achieve this objective, I examine a particular building, Structure 1714-Asub. Considering the architectural features of this structure, the spatial arrangements at Xamán Susulá during this period and the larger regional pattern, I propose two hypotheses.

The first hypothesis is based on the fact that, at first sight, the architectural and spatial characteristics of Structure 1714-Asub are similar to Classic period palaces like Palaces 32 and 33 at Group B of Tamarindito (Valdés 1997) and structures M7-22 and M7-32 at the Palace Group of Aguateca (Inomata 1997). The similarity centers on the location of the throne at the center of the building and just in front of the access door, the open space in the platform, and the associated *sacbe*. As stated above, throughout the archaeological literature, palaces are considered one indicator of state-level social organization. If Structure 1714-Asub was a palace, we should be able to identify spaces of domestic activities as well as public facilities related to political, economic and ritual activities. In this case we would expect to find domestic features along with open spaces or rooms with thrones.

The evidence does not support the hypothesis that Structure 1714-Asub was a palace. This is because we do not have evidence to prove that it served as a residence. No residential features such as sleeping benches, hearths, metates, manos, or craft production facilities were found during its exploration. In fact, there are no signs of activities related to the production of food, the main indicator of a domestic space.

Moreover, the total area of the room does not support the residential function. The area of Structure 1714-Asub is 12.24 square meters. If we subtract the area of the bench, the area reduces to 10.37 square meters. Maya archaeologists consider that buildings with a residential function should have an area of at least 20 square meters (Manzanilla 1986). If the residential aspect of Str. 1714-Asub cannot be proven, then we do not have sufficient evidence that it functioned as a palace.

Following Marcus and Flannery (1996), the evidence from Structure 1714-Asub does affirm that it was a public building. First of all, Str. 1714-Asub is located in the highest place within the site, the typical setting for public buildings. From this spot it was possible to observe the entire architectural core and the residential platforms located near the core. Moreover, the presence of the offering beneath of the floor of the throne room and the rebuilding of the previous construction phase of Structure 1714 into a larger and better quality structure are characteristics associated with public buildings rather than residences in early Mesoamerica. Finally, the fact that Structure 1714-Asub may have experienced an intentional fire supports the hypothesis that it was a public building inasmuch as the targets of raiding activities were most often public buildings rather than residences.

Therefore, the identification of Structure 1714-Asub as a public building but not as a residence does not permit us to label it as a palace. For this reason it also cannot be classified as a “scenic palace” or “presentation palace” (Valdés 2001). Structure 1714-Asub consists of one single room and is not part of a multi-room structure, which is one of the characteristics of the “presentation palaces.” Structure 1714-Asub also cannot be categorized as a “throne structure” because it is neither adjoined to any domestic

building nor does it have a restricted access (Harrison 2001).

Although Str. 1714-Asub cannot be classified as a palace or throne structure - features associated with state-level complexity - its architectural features, including its throne and open space, as well as the way in which is related to the other structures of the site (such as the *sacbe*) suggest that its function may have been somewhat similar to that of “scenic palaces” (Peniche May et al. 2009). Based on this, I propose that Structure 1714-Asub provided a public space where administrative, judicial, ritual or inter-village activities took place.

That leads us to the second hypothesis: Structure 1714-Asub was a public structure belonging to a chiefdom-level society. A word of caution, we have to take into account that Xamán Susulá is a second rank site within the three-tiered settlement hierarchy. A palace could have been present in the largest site, Xtobó. However, the fact that the settlement hierarchy has three levels and, therefore, only two levels in the political decision-making process were present suggests a chiefdom-level society (Anderson 2005; Feinman and Neitzel 1984; Wright 1984). I suggest that the arrangement of public and private spaces substantiates this hypothesis.

In the archaeological literature, chiefdoms are architecturally characterized by a separation between public and private spaces (Flannery 1998). At Xamán Susulá, residential platforms are located south and north of the public area, no residences are located in the public space immediately surrounding the architectural center and none of the structures had a both public and private function. Moreover, we can segregate the domestic platforms in two categories. We identified at least four domestic platforms as the largest at the site, although we are not able to affirm that they were

morphologically different from the other smaller structures at the site periphery. Two of these structures, Structures 1737 and 1738, were the closest to the public area. The largest platforms were probably the residences of the elite of Xamán Susulá. The segregation of public and private spaces at Xamán Susulá and the identification of possible “elite residences” are two elements that are also present in several sites of the Soconusco Region, such as Paso de la Amada during the Locona phase (Rosenswig 2000). Therefore, the arrangement of public and private spaces supports the hypothesis that this was a chiefdom-level society. According to this hypothesis, at Xamán Susulá, there was political and economic centralization that was manifested in the concentration of power or wealth in a limited few individuals or lineages (Feinman 2001).

The problem of how to classify Structure 1714-Asub remains. Based on the information presented in this section it is clear that this structure was not a chief’s house like Mound 6 at the site of Paso de la Amada (Blake 1991; Rosenswig 2000). Mound 6 is a series of apsidal structures located on the highest mound of the site. A construction sequence of at least six superimposed floors has been identified as dating to the Locona phase. All the floors were between 11 by 5 meters and 22 by 10 meters and were built on platforms that reached a cumulative height of 2.8 meters. In each construction episode, the structure increased in size and quality. This has been interpreted as a change in the social and political status of the residents. Although Structure 1714-Asub and Mound 6 are comparable because of their setting and their multiple construction phases, Structure 1714-Asub is not a residence and therefore, it cannot be labeled as the home of a chief.



In the Mesoamerican literature, Preclassic public buildings have often been classified as communal men's houses, temples or dance platforms. Communal men's houses are a type of public building that is typical of segmentary societies. Men's houses were the space where political decision-making took place. This type of public building has been reported at San José Mogote in the Valley of Oaxaca dating to the Tierra Largas phase (1400-1100BC). In San José Mogote, men's houses consist of a sequence of eight one-room buildings whose dimensions were 4 by 6 meters. These structures were apsidal in shape with wattle-and-daub walls and lime-plastered floors. Each structure was periodically razed and a new one was built on virtually the same place. Because of their small area, these structures are thought to have been restricted to a subgroup of the men in the village, those who passed through a series of rituals to attain high status (Marcus and Flannery 1996:87). However, these rituals do not imply the presence of status differentiation or decision-making specialization to the extent present in complex societies (Feinman 1991:241).

Structure 1714-Sub does not appear to be a men's house because the interior space of the room is too small - 12.24 square meters- to allow a congregation of several people. Moreover, the plan of Str. 1714-Sub is such that only one person could have been seated on the throne dominating the event, with very few people inside. This is different from the concept of communal men's house. Most importantly, the fact that it is not a communal building reinforces the hypothesis of the existence of chiefdom-level complexity.

It is also clear that Structure 1714-Sub is not a dance platform. Architecturally, these structures are very well defined as circular platforms with a keyhole shape.

Structure 1729-sub corresponds morphologically to this category. The small circular platform 3532 that is aligned to the *sacbé* and Structure 1714-Asub might also have performed this function. Keyhole shaped platforms have been reported at several Preclassic sites in Belize and are considered the places where public ritual was performed by emergent or consolidating elites (Hendon 1999, 2000).

I argue that *Plaza Lak'in* was the ceremonial compound of the architectural core. If this is the case, the presence of the circular platforms and *Plaza Lak'in* at Xamán Susulá suggests that ritual activities were probably not taking place in the throne room. Although I do not deny the fact that ritual activities were performed at Structure 1714-Asub, the main function of this structure was not related to ceremonial activities. Therefore Structure 1714-A-sub cannot be considered to be a temple or ceremonial building. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that Structure 1714-Asub does not fit the formal criteria that identify Mesoamerican ceremonial buildings. However, *Plaza Lak'in* does, especially Structure 1733.

In fact, the architectural features of Structure 1714-Asub – its throne, its open space, its setting, its basal platform and its high quality, as well as the way in which is related to the other structures of the site such as the *sacbe* suggest that its function might have been somewhat similar to that of “scenic palaces” (Peniche May et al. 2009). This means that its arrangement and setting allowed a clear view toward the platform’s open space and vice versa. Hence the noble seated at the throne was able to lead people gathered together on the platform, as well as witness the procession through the *sacbe*. Information represented in polychrome vessels also supports this argument (Harrison 2001:77; Reents-Budet 2001). Based on this, I propose that

Structure 1714-Sub provided a public space where administrative, judicial, ritual or inter-village activities took place. Structure 1714-Sub was a public building that symbolized the power of specific political actors. Thus, Structure 1714-Sub is an example of architecture of power focused on individuals.

The role of Structure 1714-Sub as symbol of power is supported by the presence of “elegant” ceramics similar to those reported from the Middle Preclassic sites of Xocnaceh and Poxilá where explorations have been conducted on the acropolises (Peniche May et al. 2009). Ceramics of this type were not reported from any other structure of the architectural core of Xamán Susulá. Moreover, the possibility that Structure 1714-Sub was the target of a ritual termination reinforces the possibility of the role that could have played during the Middle Preclassic to Late Preclassic transition (Stanton et al. 2008). This ritual termination is evidenced by the burning event, the dismantling of the back wall and stepped tiers associated with the throne, the filling of the interior of the room, the blocking off of the access door and the deposition of the large sherds just above the Structure 1714-Sub’s stucco floor. It has been proposed that the ritual destruction of structures that are symbols of power, such as structures with thrones, could have been the result of political defeat (Ambrosino 2001; Demarest et al. 2003). As stated above, this termination event may correspond with the moment of the fall of Xtobó and the changes in political power in the northwestern Yucatan at the end of the first half on the Late Preclassic period.

According to the information obtained during the explorations of this site, the type of chiefdom Xamán Susulá represents as well as the strategies that were used to obtain political integration in this chiefdom are clear. I claim that Xamán Susulá was

an individualizing chiefdom that utilized exclusionary or network strategies of political integration (Blanton et al. 1996; Feinman 2001; Renfrew 1974). I base this claim on several lines of evidence, including the characteristics of the domestic structures, Structure 1714-Sub layout and its functions and the site's participation in network exchange in order to obtain exotic goods.

In individualizing chiefdoms, the dominant political actors exteriorize the differences of rank through special domestic structures. Such residences can be recognized by size, shape and location (Renfrew 1974; Rosenswig 2000). Two marked categories of residential platforms were identified at Xamán Susulá, which are representative of the social stratification that developed at the site. As I stated above, the first category consisted of four domestic platforms, which were the largest residential structures identified at the site. Two of these platforms, Structure 1737 and Structure 1738, were located very close to the public area, although they did not form part of the public compound. It is likely that these structures were the residences of political actors who thus concentrated their power. The rest of the dwellings consisted of small platforms located to the north and west of the architectural core. The presence of two marked types of domestic buildings recalls the site of Paso de la Amada during the Locona phase, which represented an individualizing chiefdom (Rosenswig 2000).

One objection to this hypothesis is that the elite residences at Xamán Susulá can only be identified on the basis of their size and location in regard to the public architecture. The morphological variable is missing. However, we must take into consideration that the characteristics of the superstructures that were built on the platforms are unknown because they did not survive. Additionally, the fact that Xamán

Susulá was a middle rank site in the three-tiered settlement pattern hierarchy must be taken into consideration. This condition as middle-rank site translates into less elaborate elite residences here than those likely to be found at first-tier sites. The entire set of key characteristics that defines the type of chiefdom to which Xamán Susulá belonged, including more elaborate residences, is more likely to be found at Xtobó, or the first-rank site that controlled Xamán Susulá.

At Xamán Susulá, I conclude that a unique elite household or few households concentrated power. Among them, one political actor was predominant. It is possible that the political actor's household inhabited Str. 1738, which had preferential access to the architectural public core. Inside this building, near the north wall and the rock bed, we recovered a burial of an adult of unidentified sex dated to the Middle Preclassic period (Rodríguez Pérez 2009). This individual was associated with a limestone metate that was used to cover the mortuary context. Likewise, we recovered a Joventud vessel along with a lime-plaster base. Together the ceramic vessel and the lime-plaster base resembled a mushroom vessel. In the base of the vessel or mushroom's head, a reticular pattern of impressions was visible. Although more evidence is necessary to support this hypothesis, the fact that this type of vessel has been associated with ballgame paraphernalia may suggest that this individual was one of the actors with political predominance. Vessels of this type dating to the Preclassic period have been reported in different regions of Maya area, such as western Belice, Ceibal, Altar de Sacrificios, El Mirador and Cancuén (Woodfill and Spenard 2002). The presence of this vessel at Xamán Susulá suggests that political actors from this site directly or indirectly engaged in far-reaching social networks.

Artifact assemblages recovered at Xamán Susulá, mainly at Structure 1714-Asub, suggest that the political actors of Xamán Susulá participated in the network strategy related to individualizing chiefdoms. According to Blanton et al.'s model (1996), political actors participated in network exchanges to gain prestige and power vis-à-vis the actor's own group, as well as in a regional context. This status was obtained through the manipulation of social relationships outside of the local group, which were created and maintained through prestational events and payments, such as the exchange of marriage partners, exotic goods, or wealth, as well as the exchange of inclusive knowledge with cross-culturally recognized value. Moreover, as a consequence of involvement in this type of network exchange, participants developed and shared an international style.

Based on current evidence, it is clear that Xamán Susulá participated in long-distance as well as local exchange networks. Their participation might have been direct or indirect. However, because Xamán Susulá was a middle-rank site in the regional settlement hierarchy it is likely that their participation was indirect, and that the main members of the network were the elite of Poxilá, Xtobó and Xocnaceh.

Through either direct or indirect participation in these interactive networks, individual actors obtained igneous green stone, probably basalt, as well as elegant and fine ceramics and other prestige goods that were in use in the first rank sites in the regional settlement hierarchy. Interestingly, the artifacts made of igneous green stone and the elegant and fine ceramics were exclusively recovered at Structure 1714, which may suggest that such goods were exclusive to the select political actors that used the throne room. Similar artifact assemblages were recovered at Xocnaceh and Poxilá. This

suggests that the inhabitants of these sites participated in the same exchange networks. Thus elite individuals from Xamán Susulá might have manipulated network exchange in order to gain differential access to prestige goods, which translated into leadership within the local group. The throne room might have been used as the staging area where some of these prestational events and payments could have been performed.

The presence of the throne inside Structure 1714-Sub supports the hypothesis that sociopolitical power was concentrated in a specific political actor at this site. This is because only one person at a time could be seated on it controlling and / or witnessing the events that occurred inside and outside of the throne room. The configuration of the core was such that the individual seated on the throne could have been observed from any spot in the public space. Hence, Structure 1714-Sub was a public building focused on emphasizing an individual. In fact, even though there were other buildings with ceremonial functions in the architectural core of the site, the entire architectural arrangement of the core was focused on the throne room.

The phenomenon of the presence of individualizing chiefdoms during the Middle Preclassic is not exclusive to Xamán Susulá. In fact, Blanton et al. (1996) have suggested that Mesoamerican societies during the Early and Middle Preclassic periods were characterized by extensive long-distance interaction among elite who exchanged exotic goods. The sites of Chalcatzingo, San Lorenzo Tenochtitlan and Paso de la Amada can be noted as examples. However, corporate strategies were also employed during the Early and Middle Preclassic. In the Valley of Oaxaca and the Basin of Mexico, collective works were carried out in order to construct public spaces for communal ritual. In these areas, differences in rank were not expressed in elaborate

housing or burials (Feinman 2001; Rosenswing 2000).

If the argument that Xamán Susulá was an individualizing chiefdom and participated in exclusionary and network strategies is valid, then it is possible to propose a hypothesis about the collapse of the settlement. According to Blanton et al.'s (1996:4) model, in societies in which the network strategy is the basis of political and economic organization, leadership tends to be volatile and there is a great potential for conflict. In this kind of system, theoretically, any individual or household may attempt to establish network ties, which implies considerable potential for competition from other individuals. Moreover, individual military, training and social skills are often important components of political success or failure. As consequence, networks tend to go through cycles that last a generation.

Therefore, the failure of the network of exchange at Xamán Susulá could have had severe consequences for local sociopolitical relations. A lack of long-distance relationships, prohibiting the dominant political actors from obtaining the objective sources of power, could have resulted in the failure of these would-be leaders to maintain political power. The emergence of competitors who were able to gain access to the exchange network could have had a similar effect. In fact, striving competitors among the settlements controlled by Xamán Susulá or neighboring sites competing by stronger participation in the network could have lead the raid against the main symbols of power of the previous dominant group.

At Xamán Susulá, the collapse of the network exchange or the emergence of competitors who may have reached positions of power is evidenced by the ritual termination of Structure 1714-Asub. This structure was the only one in the entire site



that showed evidence of ritual destruction. This supports the idea that the throne room was a symbol of the power of the dominant political actors. Its destruction symbolized the defeat of those political actors.

In summary, the analysis of Structure 1714-Asub at Xamán Susulá, a public building that functioned as architecture of power, including the local architectural arrangement and artifact assemblages, has provided evidence to establish the level of social and political complexity. Likewise, specific information about the nature of political organization at this site has become clear. Xamán Susulá followed the strategy of exclusionary or network-based political integration.

## 5. CONCLUSION

These new discoveries in the northern Maya lowlands have provided us the data to reformulate our understanding of the nature and complexity of sociopolitical organization existent in this region during the Preclassic period. It is now clear that sociopolitical complexity beyond the level of isolated farming villages began as early as the second half of the Middle Preclassic period, and reached a peak during the Middle Preclassic to Late Preclassic transition. Nonetheless, the level of political organization that these societies had, chiefdom or state, is still debatable. Data obtained during the explorations of a middle-rank site in the three-tiered settlement pattern hierarchy of northwestern Yucatan, Xamán Susulá, have provided the means to test the models proposed for the level of organization political present during the Middle Preclassic to Late Preclassic transition.

The architectural features of the most impressive building of this site, Structure 1714-Asub, as well the material evidence obtained during its exploration, suggest that this building had a non-domestic function. Therefore it cannot be classified as either a palace or the house of a chief. It is certain that Structure 1714-Asub was a public building, but the features of this structure do not permit its classification as any of the previously established public building types known from this period. The evidence does not support the classification of this building as a men's house, dancing platform, or temple. The architectural traits as well as the arrangement of this building with regard to the other structures suggest that its functions were similar to the later scenic palaces, which are related to administrative, ideological, judicial and diplomatic activities.

Based on the evidence provided by a single public building, is difficult to demonstrate the level of political complexity present in Xamán Susulá. Public buildings have been documented in egalitarian societies, chiefdom-level societies, and state-level societies. However, the elaboration of Structure 1714-Asub, as well as of the architectural core, implies that Xamán Susulá was not organized at the tribal level. Likewise, the absence of a palace in this architectural core suggests that organization at the state level was not present, although we have to take into consideration the fact that palaces could have been present in the largest site in the region, Xtobó. In order to demonstrate that Xamán Susulá was organized at the level of chiefdom, the architectural features of the public building, the characteristics of the domestic structures, the arrangement of the site, and the larger regional context must all be taken into account.

Therefore, I propose that the level of political organization present at Xamán Susulá during the Middle Preclassic to Late Preclassic transition corresponds with that of chiefdoms. I base this conclusion on four elements: 1) the presence of Structure 1714-Asub as a symbol of the power of the chief living in Xtobó or a sub-chief living at one of the larger residences at Xamán Susulá; 2) the identification of two categories of domestic structures, elite and non-elite, based on the location and size of residential architecture; 3) the fact that the public structures and the residences are segregated; and 4) the three-tiered hierarchy of the regional settlement pattern. Further explorations at the site of Xtobó would assist in corroborating this hypothesis.

Moreover, I argue that Xamán Susulá was an individualizing chiefdom that employed exclusionary and network strategies. I base my argument on two marked

types of domestic platforms, as well as the participation of actors at Xamán Susulá in a network of exchange through which they obtained prestige goods. The mere presence of such a building as Structure 1714-Asub supports this hypothesis. Only one individual was able to be seated on the throne, where he received few people, lead people gathered together on the platform, or witnessed events occurring in the architectural core.

Structure 1714-Asub, the throne room of Xamán Susulá, represents a new type of building in the Mesoamerican chiefdoms, a building that probably had administrative, judicial, ideological and diplomatic functions. With the construction of Structure 1714-Asub during the Middle Preclassic to Late Preclassic transition, we are witnessing the beginning of the institutionalization of those activities. This structure including its throne was used as a visual symbol through which the dominance and power of the chief or subchief was reinforced. The throne room of Xamán Susulá must be considered the precursor of the palaces that were built throughout the Maya Area during later periods.

There are several problems that remain unsolved. The entire body of archaeological evidence recovered at Xamán Susulá has not yet been completely analyzed. This may bias any interpretations about the organization of the settlement. However, the main questions center on the regional-scale. There is still so little known about Middle Preclassic architecture in northern Maya lowlands that regional comparisons are severely limited. Evidence from the first-rank and third-rank sites, as well other second-rank sites in the regional settlement hierarchy is missing, a fact that limits our capability to make inferences about regional political organization. In the

future, explorations of public and residential buildings dating to the Middle Preclassic period will provide data to improve our understanding about the sociopolitical organization of emergent complex polities in the northern Maya lowlands.

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