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CITY LIFE AT PALENQUE: 2023 SEASON

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City Life at Classic Maya Palenque, Mexico" is a Collaborative Research project with primary funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities awarded to Professor Rosemary Joyce. Palenque, a UNESCO World Heritage Site in Chiapas, Mexico, is well-known for its important role in the decipherment of Maya hieroglyphic writing. Previous and ongoing work there on the temples and residence of the ruling family have produced one of the best-understood case studies of the development of a Classic Maya state during the Late Classic Period (approximately 600-800 AD). Less is known about life outside of the precincts of the ruling family. Previous projects have mapped a dense sector of likely residential occupation bounded by the Motiepa river on the west side and the steep terrain to the east, and it is this neighborhood of Palenque that is the focus of this project.

While in other major Maya cities residential areas were usually constructed with a clear layout, typically a series of structures oriented around a central patio, the majority of Palenque's mapped structures appear at first to be more randomly distributed. However, there are *some* residential groups that do follow the traditional Plazuela design at Palenque, namely, Group IV – located in roughly the center of the neighborhood we have defined. Group IV was most likely a leading neighborhood residence, home of a high-ranking *sahal* (secondary noble), and the site of the neighborhood cemetery. The question remains as to why the structures composing other clusters surrounding Group IV take such a diversity of forms and orientations. Does this diversity indicate a history of growth, where Group IV is the oldest occupied part of the neighborhood? To answer these questions, we look to the neighboring residential groups and compare the kinds of activities, history of growth and levels of wealth and access that are evident there, compared to Group IV.

The project brings together an international group of scholars, including project co-director Dr. Rodrigo Liendo (Universidad Autónoma de México) and field directors Dr. Lisa Johnson (University of Nevada, Las Vegas) and Dr. Arianna Campiani (Sapienza Università di Roma) to explore three main research questions:

How was city life in Palenque organized during the Late Classic height of its political power?

What was the structure of economic activities through which the city was provisioned?

Did residents outside of the precincts of the ruling family undertake the practices of ritual and luxury consumption documented for the ruling and noble families, as either producers or co-participants?

These questions are being addressed by exploring the redundancy of activities across a sample of residences selected using stratified random sampling design. The basic sampling unit for our project is the compound, a group of buildings and associated exterior space that excavations in other Maya sites has shown typically is the residence of multi-generational extended families. Our spatial analyses show that approximately 109 mapped structures in this area form at least 23 possible clusters, each of which includes a diversity of architectural forms. For excavation and sampling purposes, we ranked clusters using a diversity index which accounts for different structural forms within a given cluster, which formed sampling strata. The project study area includes a number of smaller structures, some isolated, others in larger groupings which may reflect differences in function, wealth, or history of growth.

The second excavation season at Palenque resulted in further confirmation that structures in a defined neighborhood away from the Palace compound were occupied by residents who enjoyed access to imported stone (obsidian) for use in daily life. The residents of the compounds explored used ceramic artifacts for ritual practices, including incense burning and the use of figurines. They also carried out ceremonies related to the burial of the dead in the familial compound. Evidence for multi-crafting, the economic specialization of a family in multiple crafts (manufacture of obsidian tools, and the use of stone tools to work fine greenstone) was recovered, along with suggestions of intensive corn grinding. This second season has thus strengthened the understanding of the diversity of experiences of urban residents at Palenque, showing the existence of families whose members, while not recorded in historical inscriptions, enjoyed diverse ways of life, some not that different from the ruling family and non-ruling families commemorated in monuments.

Excavations in May-June 2023 took place in structures J17, J18, J33, and J37, in a series of rooms in buildings located around two courtyards. One of these was a relatively small cluster of two structures sharing a very small central space. In this area a cluster of grinding tools was found in situ. Domestic features in the adjacent buildings include a built-in stone bench, and a room with a plastered floor. The lack of an identified midden in this group, a feature found in every other group we have explored in the neighborhood, raises the possibility that this was not a normal residential compound.

Excavations in a second small cluster with two buildings situated around a larger patio. At least one of these structures likely supported a perishable building, making this the simplest residential compound we have yet investigated. The second structure in this group had evidence of roof stones, suggesting that there were functional differences between the structures here. Adjacent to this second building we documented and excavated a trash deposit (Figure 1) that contained special ceramics, including figurines, a modeled ceramic cacao pod (possibly from an elaborate incensario vessel) and a fragment of modeled ceramic depicting a side profile of an individual wearing an animal headdress and a set of chest tassels (Figure 2). This deposit also yielded obsidian and chert chipped stone tools (Figure 3). This midden was used for an extended period of time in multiple episodes.

A second trash deposit encountered in excavation in this group yielded high quantities of obsidian blades and blade cores ($n = 422$ blades/ $n = 4$ blade cores), indicative of craft production taking place in this group. Some small pieces of green stone were recovered from the heavy fraction of the flotation samples and so one of the materials that may have been crafted in this residential group may have been greenstone objects. This contrasts with the finding of marble/white stone working in a group explored in our first excavation season, and lends support to the proposal that city residents organized specialized craft working as part of the growth of the city.

Most of the artifacts recovered represent daily activities expected in any household. All operations yielded ground stone manos and fragments of grinding stones, but metates, the platforms for grinding,

were encountered less frequently than manos, or handstones. It is consequently notable that nearly complete metates were found at the base of two structures in one group.

Also recovered were items likely to illuminate differences in identity within the city of Palenque: following similar patterns from previous years excavations, all areas excavated had a diversity of figurines. The figurines are evidence of household-based ritual practices. Also evidence of ritual practice, a stone circular feature in one of the excavated groups yielded human remains: a complete, articulated human arm. In association with the same structure, a complete, extended burial of a single adult individual was located. These findings are significant, as burial (including partial burials) within domestic groups is one of the indicators of differentiation of identity by families in neighborhoods like this.

The second field season at Palenque has demonstrated the potential of the suite of methods we employ to enhance knowledge of everyday life outside of the Palace of the governing family. Recovery of materials, including of fragile/perishable organic materials such as plant and animal remains, was high. In terms of the broader theoretical and interpretive implications of the first season of fieldwork, the findings support two propositions that are central to our project. One is that the residential neighborhoods away from the Palace include households enjoying many of the same luxuries and ritual practices as the well-known central group. The recovery of a evidence of crafting fine green stone, complementing the previous recovery of a unique assemblage of white stone ornaments, demonstrates the kind of household-based craft specialization that we identify as one of the possible ways decentralized development of the city might have taken place. The inclusion of greenstone processing evidence in a group also showing production of obsidian chipped stone tools is an example of multicrafting, a strategy by familial groups to expand economic gains by investing in multiple crafts. The finding of independent ritual practices continues to strongly support the growth of the city was not centrally directed.



Figure 1. Operation 472A locus 8: midden on northeast side of structure J37

