

RELIGION AND ICONOGRAPHY OF THE PRECLASSIC MAYA AT RIO AZUL, PETEN, GUATEMALA

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BACKGROUND

The ancient Maya site of Rio Azul is located in northeastern Peten, Guatemala and was the focus of a five year program of study from 1983 to 1987. Excavations at Rio Azul have produced pottery indicating an occupation beginning in the early Middle Formative (ca. 1000 BC) and extending well into the Late Classic (ca. AD 850). A mapping program at the site was completed by Miguel Orrego C. and Erick Ponciano between 1984 and 1986. In their mapping, structure G-103, a large truncated pyramidal platform was located rather isolated from the Rio Azul civic center.

A testing phase for G-103 was implemented in 1986, primarily with interest in chronology and structure function. G-103 was first thought to have been a large 14 m high platform, 50 m x 50 m. at the base and 35 m x 35 m on the top, that had supported four to five mostly perishable buildings. Although the G-103 structure is estimated at 14 m high, a significant segment of the height is believed to be a natural knoll on which it was constructed.

The 1986 excavations on top of the structure revealed, within one meter of the surface, a thick, hard stucco wall with an apron molding. The thick, smooth styled stucco was indicative of Late Preclassic technology. The Late Preclassic assessment was further supported by the ceramic analysis. The findings indicated that the presumed four to five small structures atop the platform may have formed a small plaza group comprised of plaster coated buildings which had been intentionally buried by the Late Preclassic Maya.

The 1987 season included a full excavation effort at G-103. However, within a few weeks it became clear that the wall section exposed in the 1986 season was not part of a small building forming a plaza, but rather a side wall of a monumental construction. It was the intentional covering of the stuccoed building

designates G-103-2nd, that kept it so well preserved. G-103-2nd is one of the finest examples (in terms of form, construction, and preservation) of Preclassic architectural technology in the Maya lowlands.

The Ixcario Regional Project, directed by R. E. W. Adams, returned to northeastern Peten in 1990. The project's effort at Rio Azul was limited to investigations at G-103. Among the excavations in 1990 was another test unit atop G-103, behind the staircase of G-103-2nd, to confirm the structure's chronology and the possibility of earlier constructions. A hard plaster surface was reached nearly six meters down, but excavations had to stop due to hazardous conditions from dry laid rubble fill.

The 1991 season was planned as the final effort for G-103. Among the excavations late this season was a unit and tunnel into G-203-2nd to relocate the earlier construction noted in the 1990 investigations. The intent of the tunnel excavation was to penetrate the plaster surface for chronological information. In the course of the excavation, a floor and wall segment of the earlier construction was encountered and designated G-103-3rd. The wall segment consists of a molded and incised stucco facade, apparently unique in the Maya lowlands.

PRECLASSIC CHRONOLOGY AT RIO AZUL AND G-103

Evidence for early Middle Preclassic occupation (no sphere assignment; ca. 1000 BC) at Rio Azul is limited to ceramic data. Ceramic types including Consejo Red and Chicago Orange have been identified from several areas of Rio Azul though in limited numbers. These types are very similar in form and slip color to specimens from neighboring northern Belize.

The late Middle Preclassic (Mamom Sphere; ca. 600-300 BC) is stronger in representative ceramic types, but a defined occupation zone is still elusive. Diagnostic ceramic types include Joventud Red, Guitara Incised, and Muxanal Red-on-cream. One of the significant areas for Mamom Sphere ceramics is the G-103 east side lower platform. Excavations from the eastern edge of the platform to the structure's base produced Middle Preclassic pottery, usually in the contact zone with basal rock. No structural remains for the Middle Preclassic were encountered in these test units.

The Late Preclassic (Chicanel Sphere; beginning ca. 300 BC) is much more extensive in presence across the site. The ceramics identified for this period include common and widespread lowland types, including Sierra Red, Laguna Verde Incised, Polvero Black, and Sapote Striated. Beyond ceramics, Late Preclassic architecture was encountered within the massive A-group temple complex. G-103 itself is most certainly entirely Preclassic with its last two constructions (G-103 and G-103-2nd) currently defined as Late Preclassic.

Iconographic evidence and the recovery of three postsherds indicate that

G-103-3rd falls at the Middle to Late Preclassic cusp. The three potsherds included one eroded sherd that was of no use for chronology; one sherd of Hongo Composite (which does extend into the Late Preclassic); and one Joventud Red sherd. Although the recovered sherds do not strongly identify the Middle Preclassic, it is interesting that the Hongo Composite type seems relatively rare at Rio Azul in the Late Preclassic and is presently the more diagnostic of the three sherds. The sherds described are additional data from the excavation and are not presented as a statement of fact for chronological determination. A much larger sample is needed for any confidence in a chronological assessment based on pottery.

The placement of G-103-3rd in the Middle Preclassic to early Late Preclassic (ca. 500-400 BC) is based primarily on the molded and incised stucco facade which seems quite distinct from expressions of other known «Late» Preclassic architectural iconography in the Maya Lowlands, including Uaxactun; El Mirador; Nakbe; Cerros and Lamanai. The manner of iconographic execution is more closely related to Izapan motifs and similarly expressed icons at other Pacific and highland sites of the Preclassic.

OBJECTIVES OF THIS PAPER

This paper will present the findings of investigations at G-103 in terms of ritual and related religious activity at that locale. Where termination or initiation is indicated by the finds/interpretations the nature of the analysis will be discussed. There are three major construction to be discussed. First is the outermost covering (or last construction) which is G-103 and dates to the Terminal Preclassic ca. A.D. 250. The second construction to be discussed is the thickly plastered Late Preclassic building which has been painted red. This structure is uniquely preserved and is referred to as G-103 sub 1. The third construction to be noted is G-103 sub 2, a late Middle Preclassic structure, dating ca. 400-300 B.C. (as a best guess at this time), that is coated with a layer of stucco and the upper facade has been incised.

Each structure will be discussed in terms of possible associated ritual activity. Some of the interpretation(s) as ritual action is conjecture at this stage of the analysis. A final comment concerning the abandonment of the G-103 area after the Preclassic construction will also be presented.

G-103

This large structure is located south of the main A-group, a temple complex at Rio Azul. G-103 began by covering G-103 sub 1 with a marl or plaster mud. This was followed by numerous layers of thin deposits of brown soil, white marl,

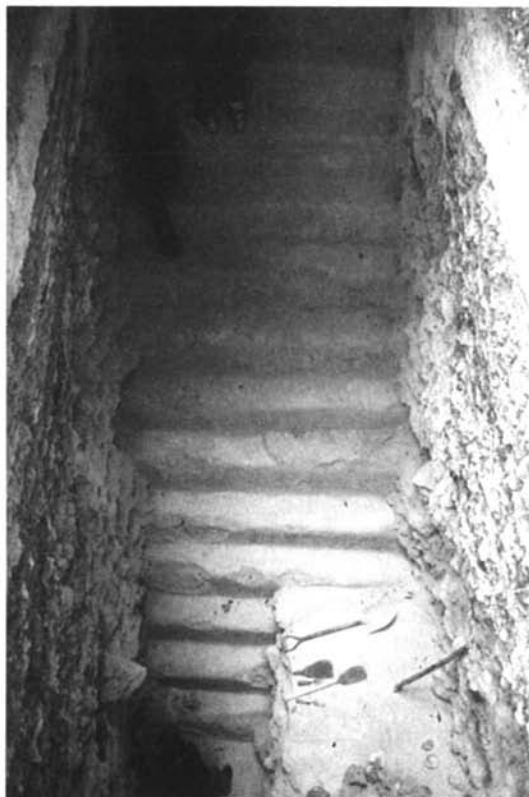


FIG. 1.—Structure G-103 sub 1, central stairs

red grainy soil; in some cases the red may be derived from burning. These many layers were then covered by relatively clean marl. The type of red material used in the red layering is uncertain. This peculiar layering of brown, red and white is however very common in profiles found in other structures at Rio Azul..., both Early and Late Classic. It seems likely that the covering of G-103 was at the very end of the Late Preclassic or possibly at the start of the Early Classic. A few artifacts have been recovered from the interface of the marl upper layer and the multi-stratified layering..., these artifacts include several complete lithic tools including a Late Preclassic oval biface and a long mano. Sherds have been recovered from the multi-layered deposits and are all of Late Preclassic types. No artifacts have been found in the marl deposits or outermost covering.

While any comment about ritual or ceremony for G-103 seems premature, it is interesting that the «formula» for covering G-103 sub 1 is the same followed

by other later constructions. There was most likely a set procedure such as the marl mud, the layering, and the upper layer of clean white marl that guided the interment of an earlier building. It is the significance of these covers that remains in question. An additional observation for G-103 will be provided shortly.

G-103 SUB 1

The second construction, G-103 sub 1 is a building covered in a thick rolling layer of red painted plaster. Only the top areas of the central stairs lack paint (fig. 1). This structure is composed of a layering of aprons..., wedding cake style... where the upper layers become smaller. An approximate date range of 100 B.C.-A.D. 150 is suggested for this structure. In its interment, some of the plastered portions from the west side of the building were placed as fill along the east side. It is clear that the eastern portions of the structure are better preserved than the western sections. This may be interpreted as part of a termination ritual. Uncovered in the 1991 season at the base of the stairs was a lip to lip cache (fig. 2).

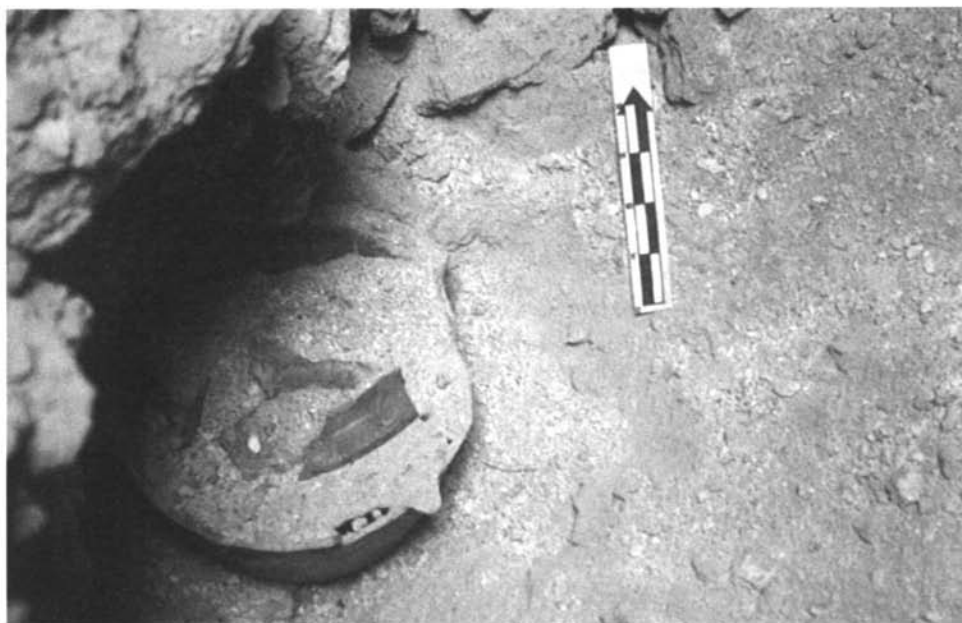


FIG. 2.—Cache interpreted as part of a terminal ritual



FIG. 3.—Stuccoed panel from the upper central facade of G-103 sub 2

The cache may also be part of a termination ritual as it is full of bone which (as analyzed by Leslie Shaw) contains part of a human skull cap, a skull and mandible fragment of an adult dog, the bones of several puppies, a spondylus shell; and one-half of a very small jade bead. Pointing towards termination ritual in this cache are the bone remains and the broken or fragmented jade bead. In particular is the inclusion of dog bone..., as Hamblin discusses..., «the dog apparently played a unique role in Maya culture, simultaneously involving religion, diet, and hunting activities» It is the religious connection that may be of greatest significance here. «The dog was connected with death and destruction, also regarded as a messenger to prepare the way to the other world...» At Zaculeu, dog skull fragments were found in a cache. Dog bones have also been found in burials with high status individuals. Dogs have also been used as sacrificial animal sometimes in place of human beings. Thus, the occurrence of dog bones in the

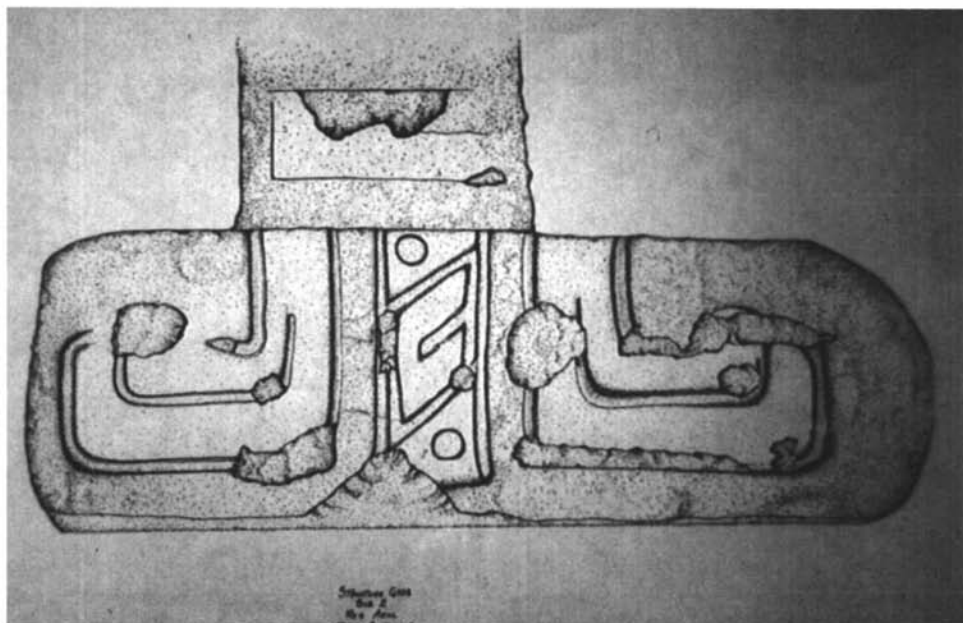


FIG. 4.—Drawing of the stuccoed and incised panel, Structure G-103 sub 2

G-103 sub 1 cache in association with the jade bead fragment and the «destruction»? of the west section of the building all seem to indicate a termination activity for the Late Preclassic structure.

G-103 SUB 2

The Middle Preclassic structure, G-103 sub 2, uncovered in 1991 ha provided only minimal information. While the later constructions faced north, the sub 2 building had faced south. Therefore, in the construction of G-103 sub 1, sub 2 was partially destroyed. This construction destruction probably has other termination activity or rights associated with it. However, the evidence has not yet been excavated. Important clues concerning religious beliefs have however been partially located. The upper central facade of G-103 sub 2 is a stuccoed and incised panel (fig. 3). Approximately, a 2 m x 4 m section of the structure was exposed; the exposed section shows a central panel containing a U-element and two dots or eyes. This central segment is bordered by large J-scrolls or feathered motifs. This fascinating early iconography is still under study and clearly additional features need exposure to complete the scene (fig. 4). Unfortunately, no

indication of paint was visible on the early building. Additional and final excavations at G-103 are planned for 1993.

SUMMARY AND OBSERVATIONS

In reviewing the Rio Azul data, the beginning point will be G-103 sub 2 and work forward in time. G-103 sub 2 was constructed facing south. The known portion of the building is a 2 m high by 4 m wide section of the uppermost facade. It is covered with a medium to thick plaster coating and incised with a central panel framed by the J-scrolls. The meaning of this early art is unknown. The back portion of G-103 sub 2 was removed/destroyed, in order to place in the staircase of G-103 sub 1. The ritual activity associated with the destruction of sub 2 is unknown, but may be located in the next season's excavation.

G-103 sub 1 faces north and was constructed of a thick plaster, most of which was painted red and is visible today. Some ritual destruction probably occurred as indicated by plaster chunks from the west side of the structure being used as fill material (or in the fill) along the east side. The lip to lip cache placed at the base of the staircase contained numerous bone fragments including an adult dog and puppies which can be connected to death and destruction. A one-half fragment of a small jade bead also lends support to ritual termination.

G-103 convers sub 1 with a marl mud, followed by numerous layers of colored soils and a white (clean) marl deposit. The G-103 area is then abandoned. There is no Early or Late Classic construction at the site. There was also encountered a Late Preclassic platform to the north in the A-3 structure (group)? which may have been the residence of a competing family with those ruling at G-103. At the A-Group, there is an interface construction between the Late Preclassic and Early Classic where small column-like, altar-like pillars ca. 1 m in height were uncovered. Bound, nude males are depicted on these pillars. One possibility is that these bound captives are members of the G-103 family; their «temple» was then ritually destroyed, buried, and the surrounding area became a no-man's land for more than 600 years.

The latter reconstruction/scenario is of course only conjecture at present. Future excavation at this already interesting site should provide vital comparative data. The role or place of ritual at Rio Azul, particularly at G-103 is evident. The exact nature or function of this ritual is the unknown, but with additional research other interpretations may be elucidated in the near future.