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THE CLASSIC MAYA PALACE
AS A POLITICAL THEATER

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INTRODUCTION

Maya archaeologists have long been fascinated by large, elaborate buildings usually called «palaces.» Archaeological evidence indicates that many «palaces» were residences of the ruling elite. I argue that palaces were also theatrical spaces where courtly performances took place. These buildings physically and symbolically shaped the forms of interaction and display. Thus, the examination of palace layouts provides important clues concerning patterns of political and ceremonial interaction and the nature of rulership. In this paper, I examine the Classic Maya royal palace as a political theater through an analysis of data from Aguateca, and discuss its implications for kingship and politics.

THE CONCEPTS OF PALACE AND ELITE RESIDENCE

I use the following terminology related to the concept of palace. The term *palace-type structure* is defined in terms of its morphological attributes regardless of its function—a large, elaborate multi-chamber or gallery building (Andrews 1975: 43). The term *elite residence* is based strictly on its function and does not concern its morphological attributes —a building occupied by elites (see Inomata and Triadan n.d. for the concepts of elite and elite residence). The term *palace* refers to an elite residence or elite residential complex that is large and elaborate. In this use, the term palace overlaps semantically with the terms palace-type structure and elite residence, but they are not synonymous. There may have existed palace-type buildings that were occupied by non-elites or that did not have residential functions. Likewise, there may have been elite residences that were small and unimpressive (Inomata and Triadan n.d.). Moreover, even in a society

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in which the ruler usually lived in a palatial structure, he or she may have traveled and left the palace occasionally. In such cases, even a temporary shelter where the ruler stayed may have had the functions and symbolic meaning of a royal residence (Geertz 1977).

The primary focus of this paper is on palaces, particularly on royal palaces where the royal family lived. Our understanding of Maya architecture has significantly increased over the last few decades, and now most archaeologists are confident that some of the palace-type buildings were indeed residences of the royal family (Harrison 1970; Webster 2001; Webster and Inomata 1998). Although I am not precluding the possibility that Maya rulers spent some of their time in unimpressive structures or even in temporary shacks, archaeologists' ability to detect royal or elite residences that are not large and elaborate is severely limited. Thus, most data derive from palace-type structures that served as elite residences. In addition, Maya rulers appear to have been strongly tethered to the spacial loci of palaces generation after generation (Webster 2001).

One also needs to recognize that the morphological attributes of palaces have functional and symbolic implications. The sheer size and elaborateness of palaces probably impressed the Maya viewers and users of these buildings. Palaces may have caused unique emotional responses, which may have been either positive —awe and respect— or negative —envy and resentment. Such responses derived partly from the common knowledge that the construction and maintenance of large, elaborate buildings required a conspicuous amount of labor, expensive materials, skills, and technologies. In terms of their functions, large buildings were capable of accommodating a significant number of people and activities, whether such functions were originally intended or not. Though these basic assumptions are cross-culturally applicable, more specific functions and symbolic meanings of palaces need to be examined in specific historical and cultural contexts.

My assumption is that architectural designs of palaces reflect the symbolism and function of the ruler and royal court to a certain degree. Rulers in many pre-modern societies were not only political leaders but were also figures heavily loaded with symbolism, which comprised two conflicting aspects. On one hand, a ruler was an exemplar and a symbol of the integration of society. On the other hand, a ruler embodied supernatural beings and was distant and different from the mundane of society (Geertz 1980; Houston and Stuart 1996; Inomata and Houston 2001; Sahlins 1985). Although in all kingdoms rulership represented these two conflicting aspects, the way the two themes were configured differed significantly from one society to another.

As to political organization, in most pre-modern societies the royal court—a group of individuals surrounding the sovereign—formed an important arena of political interaction (Inomata and Houston 2001). The royal court may have functioned as an extended household of the ruler, both functionally and symbolically. It provided basic necessities for the public and private lives of the ruler, who

presided as a patriarchal or matriarchal figure (Inomata and Houston 2001; McAnany and Plank 2001; Sanders and Webster 1988). In many traditional societies, the royal court also served as a primary administrative apparatus, although some pre-industrial societies, including Quin-dynasty China, developed a bureaucracy more specifically geared toward administrative functionality and separated from the royal court (Inomata 2001a).

In terms of symbolism, the meaning of the royal palace was correlated closely with that of kingship. The royal palace was at once an exemplary center of society symbolizing societal integration and a liminal space distant from the mundane of the rest of society. In terms of function, the royal residence may have served to facilitate domestic needs of the royal family, to seclude the sovereign from the rest of society, to represent the authority of the ruler, and to house the administrative, diplomatic, and ceremonial activities of the polity.

THEATRICAL PERFORMANCE, VISIBILITY, AND SPACE

The symbolism of rulership was expressed not only through the mere presence of royal palaces but also through practices and interactions among the individuals who occupied or visited those buildings (Houston and Taube 2000: 289). Their interactions can be seen as performance. As Goffman (1967, 1974) and Turner (1986a, 1986b) elucidated it, theatricality is an integral part of the social lives of human beings. In any societies theatrical performances range from relatively unstructured daily interactions to highly ritualized spectacles (Beeman 1993; Hymes 1975; Schechner 1985, 1988). In the royal court, interactions were particularly theatrical. The attire and actions of courtiers, guided by decorum, formed theatrical spectacles, which were viewed by the participants and audience (Geertz 1980; Brown and Elliott 1980). Theatrical displays were forms of interaction not only among dramatis personae but also between the players and the audience. Moreover, in such activities the division between the players and viewers was often blurred.

Foucault (1977) has noted that visibility is a critical element in understanding how power and the state operate. Modernity is a society of discipline, whereas antiquity was a civilization of spectacle. In other words, modern states emphasize the technique of surveillance, rendering subjects visible to the eye of power. In the oft-cited design of Panopticon, each prison cell was visible from the supervisor, while visual communication between adjoining cells were not possible. While modern states use the techniques of display, such as museums, to impress and educate the masses, the agents of power themselves remain rather invisible (Bennett 1988). Traditional societies, in contrast, relied on spectacles, in which the sovereign and other elements of the state themselves were made visible, being constantly on display. Though this is a rough generalization, it elucidates an critical aspect of governmental institutions.

While spectacles conducted or sponsored by the state served to convey do-
minant ideologies that justified the unity of heterogeneous groups, they were
much more than a tool of state domination. Public performances often encapsu-
lated a society's deepest values and traditions, which were exhibited not only to
subjects and outsiders but also to the elite of the community (see MacAloon
1984: 21-22; Singer 1959: xii-xiii). Such events created what Turner (1984: 21)
called public liminality, which may have given meaning to life and the world, and
may have helped to enforce the moral unity among the participants. In his study of
Balinese states, Geertz (1980: 13) even suggests that such theatrical spectacles
were the raison d'être of the states. Moreover, an emphasis on spectacles implies
that performers were constantly under the scrutiny of the audience. In the royal
court, theatrical display was an inherent component of competitive interactions
among court members, as well as with foreign allies and competitors. Those
who did not meet the standard were likely to suffer embarrassment or even the
loss of positions and power. The sovereign and courtiers on public display were
also under the check of their own subjects.

The Classic Maya strongly emphasized theatrical displays of religious cere-
monies and courtly activities, which is vividly documented in numerous stelae,
panels, lintels, mural paintings, and ceramic paintings (Kerr 1989-97; Miller
1986; Schele and Miller 1986; Tate 1992). The ruler was probably the central fi-
gure in many theatrical acts. A large portion of stone monuments depicts rulers
engaging in public performance. In addition, Houston and Taube (2000: 276)
point to a text that named a Tikal ruler as a singer. Grube (1992) has deciphered a
glyph signifying «to dance» and has demonstrated that many stelae depict rulers
dancing. It is interesting to note that the Maya term for a ruler, *ajaw*, signifies «he
who shouts» (Houston and Stuart 1996: 295; Houston and Taube 2000: 273). This
term may originally have implied compliance with a leader's wishes by his or her
followers or a leader's ability to speak on behalf of supernatural beings (Houston
and Stuart 2001: 59). Another possibility is that, when the concept of rulership
emerged in Preclassic times, *ajaw* more literally reflected the importance of a le-
ader's verbal performance in a theatrical setting.

Archaeologists cannot directly observe ancient theatrical performance, alt-
hough iconographic and epigraphic depictions provide glimpses of such activities.
Built environments and spatial arrangements, however, provide important clues to
the nature of theatrical interactions. Buildings played an important role in thea-
trical interactions, providing stages and backgrounds for performances and sha-
ping patterns of communication (Elias 1983). For example, Houston (1998: 343)
notes that in Classic Maya palace scenes figures occupying higher locations were
of higher ranks than those who took lower positions. In other words, built envi-
ronments framed an aspect of social relations among those who used the structu-
res. Buildings also shape patterns of interactions by defining access, capacity, and
visual and acoustic effects (Higuchi 1983; Hillier and Hanson 1984; see Hartung

1980; Kowalski 1987 for the analysis of visual effects of Maya palaces). In the analysis of built environments as theatrical spaces, it is important to examine them through the perspective and experience of its users and viewers (Hall 1966; Higuchi 1983; Moore 1996; Tilley 1994).

The aspect of built environments as theatrical spaces is clear in ceremonial plazas and temples, which served as primary stages for public displays at Classic Maya centers. Large plazas were probably designed to hold a large number of people. Principal plazas at many Maya centers appear to have been large enough to accommodate all or a large part of the population of the polities (Houston 1997). It is probable that the ruler performed ceremonial acts in plazas, where the ruler was visible to a large audience. Carvings on stelae placed in plazas recorded such public performances by rulers (Grube 1992: 216). Those who entered plazas and viewed stelae could re-experience theatrical displays in the same space where the acts had taken place. Hieroglyphic writings may have been intended to be read aloud (Houston 1994), and thus may have served as media for theatrical performance.

Flat plazas themselves, however, were not effective stages for theatrical interactions among a large number of people. Performances by rulers in plazas would not have been very visible for a large audience standing at the same level. In this regard, high temples provided different settings. The pyramidal shapes of many temples probably reflected Maya religious beliefs related to sacred mountains (Freidel *et al.* 1993: 139). Yet, once built, these forms of building must have had specific theatrical effects, whether they were originally intended or not. Although the interiors of temples were probably segregated religious space, rulers ascending temples would have been highly visible to a large number of people who filled the plazas in front of them. In such settings, however, facial expressions and subtle gestures would have been unrecognizable to a distant audience. Likewise, spoken words would have been unintelligible in most parts of the plaza (Moore 1996: 158). Such conditions probably affected the types of performance conducted on temples and in plazas.

Palaces were smaller and more restricted spaces than plazas, and thus provided different types of theatrical space. Their smaller spaces and limited access defined who could participate in theatrical acts and how these participants interacted with each other.

AGUATECA

The Classic Maya center of Aguateca is located in the Petexbatun region of the southwestern Peten, Guatemala. It appears to have been attacked by enemies at the beginning of the ninth century, and the elite residential area around the probable royal palace was burned. The excavation of sub-royal elite residences in
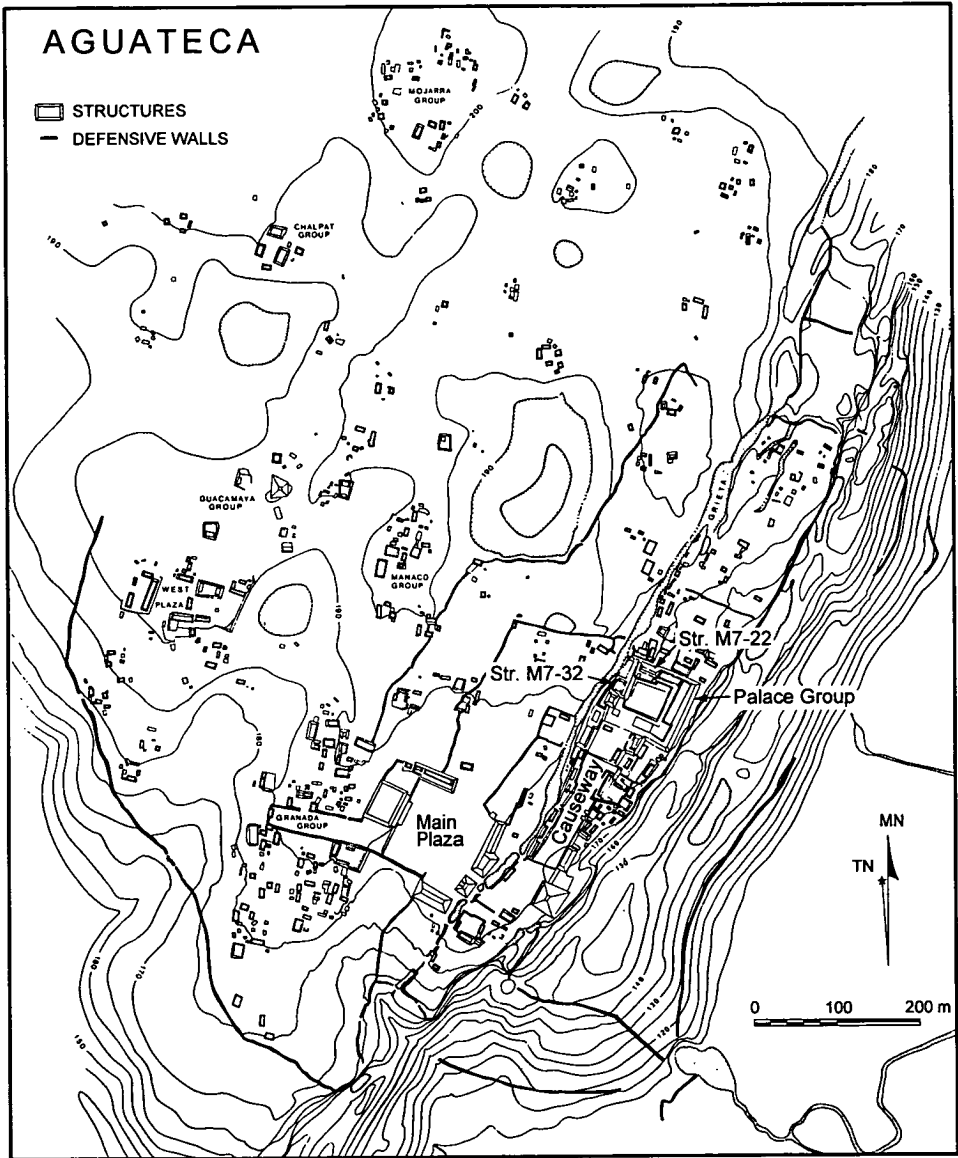
FIG. 1.—Map of Aguateca, showing the locations of the Palace Group, the Main Plaza, the Causeway, Str. M7-22, and Str. M7-32.

this area revealed rich assemblages of complete and reconstructible objects. The residents probably left or were taken away rapidly, leaving most of their belongings behind (Inomata 1995, 1997; Inomata and Stiver 1998; Inomata *et al.* 1998). In 1998 and 1999 the members of the Aguateca Archaeological Project conducted extensive excavations in the possible royal palace compound, which we called the Palace Group (Fig. 1). An important objective of this operation was to examine whether the royal palace complex was abandoned rapidly. We expected that, if the royal palace complex were rapidly abandoned, the excavation of the compound would provide unprecedented data on the use, meaning, and residents of a royal palace. But no such luck. We almost completely exposed Strs. M7-22 and M7-32 to find that most rooms had been swept clean and did not contain any complete or reconstructible objects (Figs. 2 and 3). Only the easternmost room of Str. M7-22 housed numerous objects behind its sealed entrance. In some areas inside and around the buildings, excavators found thick deposits of broken objects, including ceramics, lithics, and bones. The royal family probably abandoned the center of Aguateca before the final attack by enemies. Then, the victorious enemies may have conducted termination rituals at the Palace Group (Inomata n.d.).

Despite its gradual abandonment, this architectural complex still provides unique information. The inherent advantages of the Aguateca data for a study of the Classic Maya palace include the following three points. First, the early abandonment by the royal family and the post-abandonment rituals by enemies present important implications for the symbolic meaning of the royal palace. Second, Aguateca was occupied for a relatively short period, probably from the early eighth century to the beginning of the ninth century. Structures may not have gone through significant rearrangement. Many palaces at other centers that were occupied for a long period experienced numerous episodes of re-building. In such cases, the use pattern of palaces may have changed over time and may be more difficult to understand. Data from Aguateca with a short occupation are advantageous for the study of synchronic patterns of building use. Third, although the royal palace itself did not exhibit the pattern of rapid abandonment, excavation data from these sub-royal residences aid significantly in the interpretation of the royal palace.

THE ROYAL PALACE OF AGUATECA

The Palace Group was similar to other residential groups in terms of its layout, but was far larger than others. The two excavated buildings, Strs. M7-22 and M7-32, proved to be multiple-chambered structures with floor plans similar to those of the other elite residences (Figs. 2 and 3). They are the only buildings at Aguateca that as yet have been confirmed to have had vaulted roofs. In other words, the Pa-

FIG. 2.—Str. M7-22 after excavation viewed from the south: a) Its western portion; b) its central and eastern portions.

lace Group was the most elaborate and largest residential group at Aguateca. In addition, possible termination rituals conducted by enemies point to the symbolic importance of this group. These lines of evidence indicate that the Palace Group was indeed the residential complex for the royal family of Aguateca.

This royal palace of Aguateca appears to have contained facilities that catered to the mundane needs of the royal family and that served for public and ceremonial activities. Strs. M7-22 and M7-32 were probably the living quarters of the royal family. Other buildings in this group may have been geared primarily toward ceremonial and administrative functions. Strs. M7-25 and M7-26, occupying the northeastern and eastern parts of the group, are long buildings with open galleries and do not seem to have been residences. Str. M7-31 on the western side has a pyramidal shape and may have been a temple or shrine.

Data from the excavation of other elite residences along the Causeway are suggestive for the interpretation of the Palace Group. In rapidly abandoned elite residences the center rooms usually contained a smaller number of objects than the rooms on the sides. Objects found in the center rooms include medium-sized jars for liquids, serving vessels, scribal implements, as well as long obsidian blades and an imitation stingray spine used possibly for blood-letting. It is probable that the center rooms were used mainly by the household heads

FIG. 3.—Str. M7-32 after excavation viewed from the east.

for meetings, feasting, and their courtly work (Inomata and Stiver 1998; Inomata *et al.* 1998). Vase paintings from various Maya centers depict such scenes that possibly took place in the center rooms of elite residences (Fig. 4). The ceramic vessel assemblages found in the center rooms of the excavated residences resemble those shown in vase paintings. Side rooms usually housed numerous storage vessels and other domestic objects. Large *manos* and *metates* were often found inside or in front of these rooms. These rooms were probably closely related to mundane domestic activities, as well as to craft and art production (Inomata 2001b). Some side rooms, however, contained a small number of objects, and a large amount of space was left open. These rooms may have been sleeping quarters.

Strs. M7-22 and M7-32 of the Palace Group may have had patterns of use similar to these elite residences. Their center rooms were larger than other rooms. It is probable that these rooms were used for meetings and audiences. It is not clear, however, which room was used by the ruler. Given the elaborate construction of Str. M7-32, I believe that its center room was the primary throne room of the ruler. It is possible that the ruler also used the center room of Str. M7-22. Alternatively, this room might have been used by other royal individuals. I would favor the former hypothesis, because the sealed easternmost room of Str. M7-22 contained numerous objects, including possible royal regalia, such as ceremonial

FIG. 4.—Painting on a polychrome vase found in an elite residence (Str. M7-35) of Aguateca. It depicts a political gathering that probably took place in the center room of an elite residence. Note that the space for the meeting was not confined to the interior of the room. The gathering involved individuals staying outside the room, as well as a lord sitting on the throne inside the room and figures sitting or standing on the floor of the room. Ceramics vessels and other objects were also displayed outside the room.

masks, suggesting the close association of this building with the ruler. In addition, probable termination ritual deposits were found around the two buildings, indicating that both of them were symbolically important. The center rooms of Strs. M7-22 and M7-32 were connected to a side room via a doorway in the room division. These side rooms may have been private rooms for the ruler. Other side rooms that were not directly connected with the center rooms may have been used by his family members or his servants.

All excavated elite residences in the Causeway area contained ground stones, as well as possible storage and cooking vessels. The residents of each building appear to have prepared their food in and around their houses. It is not clear, however, whether food was prepared in the Palace Group. In this regard, data from a small test pit placed next to Str. M7-9 to the north of the Palace Group are suggestive. Excavators uncovered numerous *mano* fragments. These grinding stones were larger than most *manos* associated with elite residences along the Causeway. It is probable that Str. M7-9 or a nearby structure served as a kitchen for the royal family.

THE ROYAL PALACE AS A THEATRICAL SPACE

How did the Palace Group function as a theatrical space? What implications can we draw on the nature of theatrical acts and participants? One factor that defines the nature of a theatrical space is its access. The Palace Group of Aguateca is a relatively well defined architectural complex. Its eastern and western sides are delimited by a high vertical cliff and a deep chasm, and thus its access is relatively limited. The main access to the Palace Group was provided by a wide causeway connected to its southern side. The ruler, royal family, and foreign dignitaries most likely used this main entrance to the royal palace. It is not clear whether other people were allowed to use this entrance. It is probable, however, that many nobles walked on the causeway because numerous buildings faced this street. The Palace Group probably had other secondary entrances. There appear to have been small stairways on the southern side near the southeastern corner, on the eastern side, and on the northern side.

An even more important factor is visibility, particularly the visibility of the ruler as a primary actor. The center room of Str. M7-22 is located along the axis of the Causeway and the main entrance of the Palace Group (Fig. 5). Given enough light in the room, a person sitting on the bench of the center room of Str. M7-22 would have been visible not only to the people in the plaza but also to those in the northern part of the Causeway. The visibility of the person would have declined beyond the point 120 m south of the structure, because the Causeway sloped down (Figs. 5 and 6). One needs to consider the possibility that there existed a gate made of perishable materials near the entrance to the Palace Group that
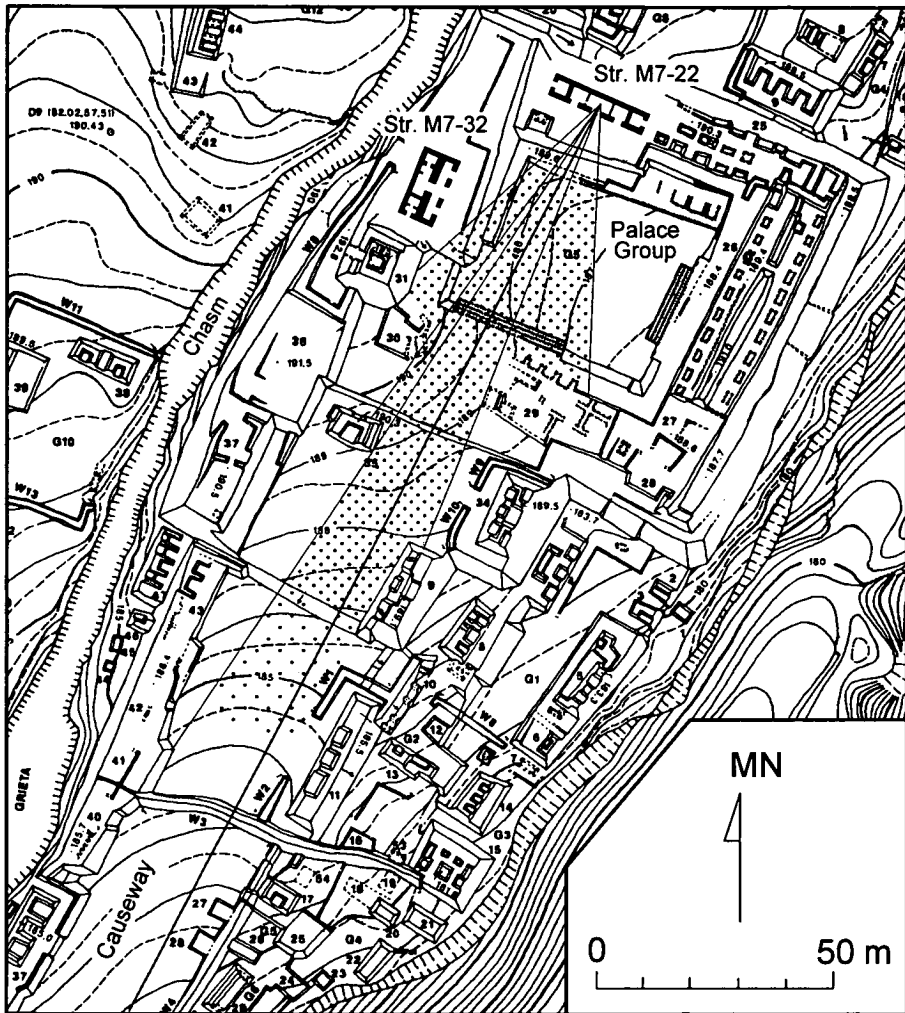
FIG. 5.—The visibility of a person sitting on the bench of the center room of Str. M7-22. The person would have been visible from the shaded area. Note that the center room is placed along the axis of the Causeway.

would have blocked this view. However, I did not find any traces of such a gate on the surface. Moreover, the position of the center room of Str. M7-22 appears to have been deliberate. Str. M7-22 was probably designed to allow its occupants to command the view of a wide area and to be visible even to those who stayed outside of the Palace Group (Fig. 7).
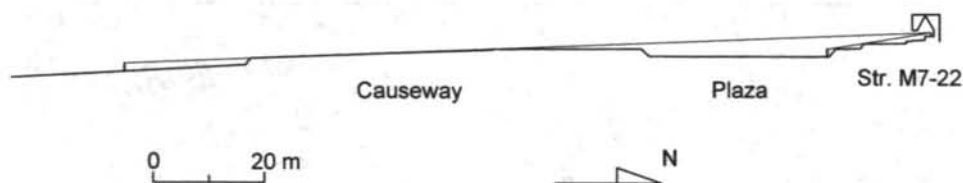
FIG. 6.—North-south cross-section of the center room of Str. M7-22, the Palace Group plaza, and the Causeway, indicating the mutual visibility of a person sitting on the bench of the center room of Str. M7-22 and of those standing in the area in front of the building.

The inside of Str. M7-32 was not visible from the Causeway (Fig. 8). Moreover, this building consisted of two rows of rooms. Although Str. M7-32 faced the plaza, a person sitting in the back room of this building would have been less visible than those in Str. M7-22. The bench of the center room, however, was placed along the central access of the building, and the visibility of a person occupying the bench was still maintained to a certain degree. If there were enough light
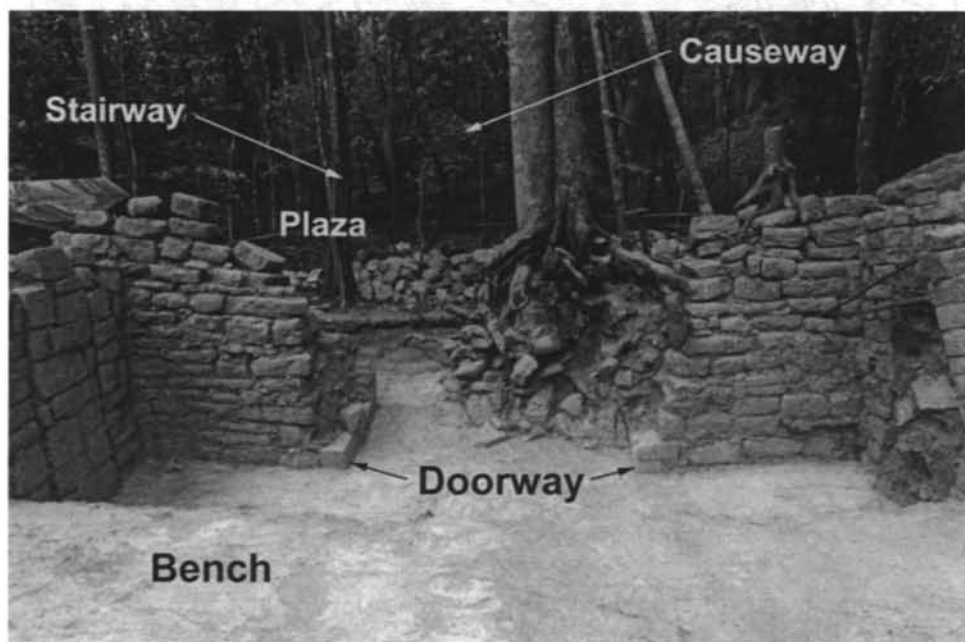

FIG. 7.—View from the center room of Str. M7-22. The photograph was taken from the top of the collapsing back wall. A person sitting on the bench would have commanded a wider view of the Palace Group plaza and the northern part of the Causeway.
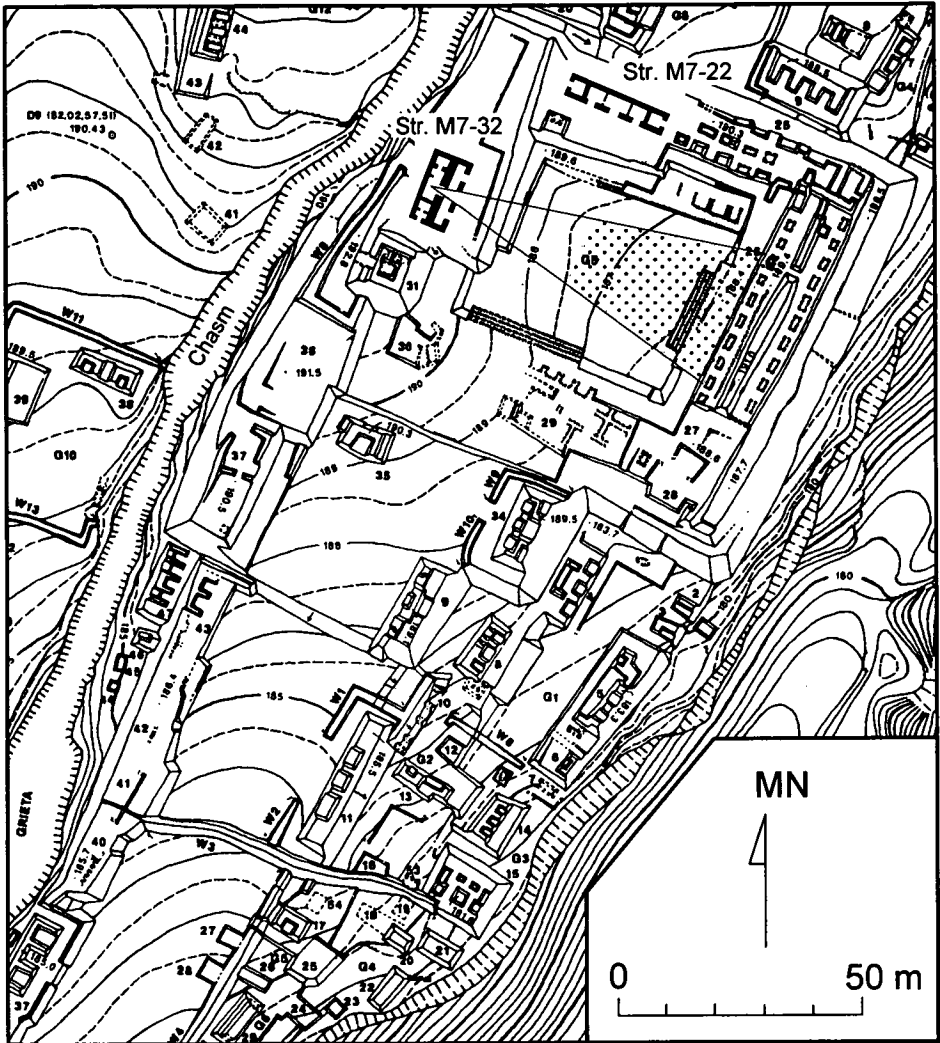
FIG. 8.—The visibility of a person sitting on the bench of the center room of Str. M7-32. The person would have been visible from the shaded area.

in the room, the person would have been visible from a large part of Str. M7-26, an open-gallery-type structure (Fig. 9).

The importance of the ruler as an object of display is indicated in the epigraphic and iconographic record. Stephen Houston and David Stuart deciphered the *il*-glyph meaning «to see» or «to witness» and pointed out the importance of
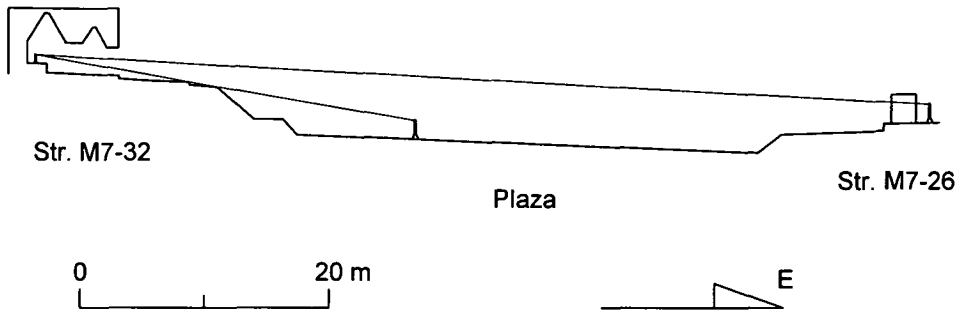
FIG. 9.—East-west cross-section of the center room of Str. M7-32, the Palace Group plaza, and Str. M7-26, indicating the mutual visibility of a person sitting on the bench of the center room of Str. M7-32 and of those standing in the area in front of the building.

acts of witnessing (Houston 1993: 139; Houston and Taube 2000: 286-287; Stuart 1987; Stuart and Houston 1994). The glyph is often used in the context in which royal personages visited foreign centers and witnessed ceremonial acts held by hosting rulers. Although glyphic texts were silent on non-elites, it is probable that many non-elites probably witnessed such performances by elites.

Although plazas or the buildings surrounding them may have been stages for many ceremonies to be witnessed, acts of display and witnessing also took place in royal palaces. Many vase paintings depict scenes of courtly interactions (Kerr 1989-1997; Reents-Budet 1994; 2001). Some paintings show architectural elements such as pillars, room divisions, and curtains, indicating that these interactions occurred in multi-chambered buildings. Paintings typically present points of view from outside of the buildings. Scribes or artists who painted these scenes may have participated in these courtly exchanges, or their specific duty may have been to document such events. Although we need to consider the possibility that ceramic paintings may not be faithful depictions of historical events, the richness of the corpus of courtly scenes suggests that certain courtly events were meant to be witnessed.

One might doubt that the interiors of dark rooms would have been visible from a distance. Some ceramic paintings, however, show that gatherings involved people staying outside of the room (Fig. 4). Whereas the ruler sitting inside the room may not have been highly visible, the general scene of gathering could have been clearly witnessed from a large area. In addition, Landa indicated that, in Contact-period Yucatan, meetings were usually held at night (Tozzer 1941: 87). Ceramic paintings from the Classic period also show scenes of meetings held at night. The interiors of rooms illuminated by torches would have been clearly visible from the outside.

Many political meetings that took place at Classic Maya royal palaces were not secretive ones behind closed doors, and the ruler who sat in a throne room of

his palace was not completely secluded from the rest of society. If my assumption that the Aguateca ruler used the center rooms of both Strs. M7-22 and M7-32 is correct, it means that the ruler changed his visibility depending on occasions. When the ruler sat in the center room of Str. M7-32, he would have been least visible. He would have been seen only by those who were allowed into the Palace Group. The center room of Str. M7-22 would have been more visible. He may have been seen even by those who were not allowed into the Palace Group. At the Main Plaza and in the buildings surrounding it, the ruler would have been visible to the largest audience, or potentially to the entire population of the polity. These different degrees of the ruler's visibility are reflected in stone monuments and ceramic paintings. Stelae and other stone monuments that documented public displays were usually placed in plazas and a large number of people could probably see them. Ceramic paintings that recorded theatrical events with a smaller audience were circulated among a limited number of viewers.

The situations at larger centers may have been somewhat different. For example, the Central Acropolis of Tikal and the Palace of Palenque, which were most likely the royal palace complexes of these centers, were more complex than the Palace Group of Aguateca (Harrison 1970, 1999; Miller 1998). Str. 5D-46 of Tikal, possible living quarters of a ruler (Harrison 1999), was surrounded by other buildings, and the visibility of a ruler who sat in this structure would have been relatively low. Caana of Caracol may have been the most segregated royal palace. This complex sat on a large pyramidal base, and its access was highly limited (Chase and Chase 2001). It is probable that at these large centers the seclusion of the ruler may have been a more important issue.

Despite their more closed arrangements, these royal palaces at larger centers still functioned as theatrical spaces. These palaces contained open courtyards. These open spaces and buildings facing them were probably stages for theatrical interactions, although there was tighter control as to who could witness such acts. In addition, both the Central Acropolis of Tikal and the Palace of Palenque connected to large public plazas via wide stairways (Fig. 10). As indicated by Bonampak murals and some ceramic paintings, these wide stairways were probably effective stages for theatrical displays (Fig. 11; see also Miller 1986; Reents-Budet 2001). These patterns imply that rulers of larger centers had a wider range of choice in their display and visibility.

CONCLUSIONS

In Classic Maya society the ruler was a focus of theatrical display, which is suggested by stone monuments and ceramic paintings. Plazas and temples created theatrical spaces where the ruler could communicate with a large audience. Even in the royal palace, a certain degree of the ruler's visibility was maintained. Royal

FIG. 10.—Stairway on the western side of the Palace of Palenque.

FIG. 11.—Ceramic painting showing a theatrical display that took place on a wide stairway in front of a palace-type building. © Kerr 1978. File No. 767.

palaces at Classic Maya centers were also stages for theatrical interactions among rulers, their subjects, and foreign visitors. Some political interactions at the royal palace involving the ruler were probably meant to be witnessed by a specific audience.

The relative openness of Classic Maya palaces that facilitated the visibility of rulers may become clearer when we compare them to royal palaces from other parts of the world. For example, the «Forbidden City» of China, surrounded by a moat and wall, may represent the opposite end of a continuum —a strong emphasis on the segregation of the emperor from the rest of society. Likewise, in premodern Japan only high-status courtiers were allowed to see the emperor directly. In the Minoan palace of Knossos, access and visibility were tightly controlled, as its name «Labyrinth» implies. Such closed arrangements of royal palaces are not unique to the Old World societies. Royal compounds of Chan Chan, Peru, were also strongly segregated from the outside world by continuous walls (see Flannery 1998).

Any ruler needs to strike a balance between his or her visibility to and seclusion from the rest of society, but there is wide variability from society to society. The Classic Maya appear to have emphasized the visibility of the ruler strongly. These acts of display and witness may have served as tools of political propaganda for the ruler. An emphasis on visibility, however, may also mean that the deeds of the ruler had to be constantly checked and approved by his council, nobles, and even by commoners.

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