

BURIALS, OFFERINGS, FLINTS AND THE CULT OF ANCESTORS: THE CASE OF NAKUM STRUCTURE X, PETEN, GUATEMALA

**JAROSŁAW ŻRAŁKA¹, WIESŁAW KOSZKUL¹, VARINIA MATUTE², BOGUMIŁ PILARSKI¹,
BERNARD HERMES², JUAN LUIS VELÁSQUEZ²**

¹ *Institute of Archaeology, Jagiellonian University, Cracow, Poland.*

E-mail: j.zralka@uj.edu.pl, wkoszku@wp.pl, bm.pilarski@gmail.com

² *Nakum Archaeological Project, Flores, Guatemala.*

E-mail: variniamatute@gmail.com; bernardhermes26@gmail.com; jlvelasquez57@yahoo.com

Abstract

Recent investigations at the Maya centre of Nakum (located in north-eastern Guatemala) included intensive excavations of Structure X (a.k.a. Structure 104) – one of the largest pyramidal temples at this site. This research showed that the first major version of this building consisted of a three-terraced platform dated to the Middle Preclassic period (750-300 BC), which was part of an important complex, the so-called E-Group. Such groups constitute the oldest manifestation of monumental architecture in the Maya Lowlands. With time, Structure X was converted into a large pyramidal structure in which several burials were situated during the Classic period (AD 250-800), making it an important mausoleum with interments of important elite members of local society. One of these burials (no. 8) was discovered below the floor of the temple building located on top of the pyramid and was a richly equipped tomb. It is most likely the resting place of one of the Nakum kings reigning during the Early-Late Classic transition (c. AD 550-650). This tomb had 11 vessels, including beautiful examples of polychrome Maya ceramics (representing different supernatural beings), many marine materials, five stingray spines and other artefacts. The tomb chamber was also covered by a deposit consisting of several thousand flint flakes that most probably had some symbolic meaning. In this article we discuss ancient Maya burial customs as documented in Structure X and present it in a wider perspective. We also describe similar lithic deposits associated with some of the richest Lowland Maya tombs and present their meaning and symbolism.

Keywords: mortuary cults, burials, lithic deposits

Resumen

Las investigaciones recientes en el centro maya de Nakum (localizado en el Noreste de Guatemala) incluyeron excavaciones intensivas del Edificio X (también conocido como Edificio 104) – uno de los templos piramidales más grandes en este sitio. Los trabajos de investigación demostraron que la primera versión mayor de este edificio consistió en una plataforma de tres terrazas fechada para el período Preclásico Medio (750-300 a.C.), la que formaba parte de un complejo importante de edificaciones al que se denomina como tipo Grupo E. Este tipo de grupos constituyen la manifestación más antigua de la arquitectura monumental en las Tierras Bajas Mayas. Con el tiempo, el Edificio X fue convertido en una pirámide grande, en la cual durante el período Clásico (250-800 d.C.) fueron depositados varios entierros, lo que le convierte en un mausoleo importante que contiene sepulturas de los miembros de la elite local. Uno de estos entierros (No. 8) es una tumba con una rica

parafernalia que fue descubierta abajo del piso del edificio del templo ubicado en la cima de la pirámide. Probablemente este es el lugar del descanso de uno de los reyes de Nakum, que gobernaba durante la transición del Clásico Temprano y Tardío (aprox. 550-650 d.C.). Esta tumba contenía 11 vasijas, incluyendo ejemplos hermosos de cerámica policroma maya (representando diferentes seres sobrenaturales), muchos materiales marinos, cinco espinas de raya y otros artefactos. La cámara de la tumba estaba también cubierta por un depósito de miles de lascas de sílex que probablemente tenían un significado simbólico. En este artículo analizamos las antiguas costumbres funerarias mayas documentados en el Edificio X y los presentamos en una perspectiva más amplia. También se hace una descripción de depósitos líticos similares asociados con algunas de las tumbas más ricas de las Tierras Bajas Mayas, y presentamos su significado y simbolismo.

Palabras clave: cultos mortuorios, entierros, depósitos líticos

INTRODUCTION

Recent investigations at Nakum, an important pre-Columbian Maya site located in north-eastern Guatemala, concentrated on the excavation and documentation of the architectural evolution of a monumental construction designated Structure X (or Str. 104). Structure X is a unique pyramidal temple located in the Northern Sector of the site. This research brought about the discovery of a series of burials, offerings as well as evidence for the cult of ancestors and other ritual activity. Taken together they indicate that Structure X played a very special role in the ritual life of the local community and possibly also in the legitimization of the power of the local elites.

Our research demonstrates that Structure X, along with several neighbouring constructions (Structures 103, 105 and 96), was first built during the late Middle Preclassic (ca. 600-300 BC) as part of an E-Group complex. However, towards the Classic period (3rd-9th centuries AD), Structure X was converted into a kind of mausoleum where elite members were buried and the local inhabitants carried out activities associated with ancestor veneration.

Nakum Structure X is situated on the eastern side of a spacious plaza (North Plaza) (Figure 1). Its location may fit a widespread architectural model common in the Maya area and usually described as an eastern shrine group or Plaza Plan 2 (PP2) pattern. Such complexes exhibit special function structures at the eastern side of plazas: these served as household shrines (or *oratorios*) where important ancestors were buried. In the classical model defined by Marshall Becker (1971, 1999, 2003, 2014) and later recognized by several scholars at various other Maya sites (Ashmore 2007: 56, 140; Chase and Chase 1994, 2011: 80-81, 84; Welsh 1988: 186-190, Table 105), the eastern part of the plaza in various residential groups was flanked by structures – with a more or less square base – that were taller than neighbouring structures. All remaining constructions in such complexes/groups define the perimeter of a plaza to the north, south and west and conformed to rectangular plans and residential functions. This architectural layout and funerary function is typical for the Southern Maya Lowlands. At some sites, such as Caracol the same pattern is very widespread: ca. 85 % of all tested eastern shrines were found to contain burials or caches (Chase and Chase 2011: 84).

Nakum Structure X seems to differ slightly from this definition in that it does not form a classic residential compound with other buildings (of residential character) distributed around a courtyard. Nevertheless, other large and east-flanking pyramidal temples with tombs (e.g. Tikal Temple I) can be also ascribed to this model (see Chase and Chase 1994: 55), although they are not part of a 'typical' Plaza Plan 2 architectural pattern. Of course, it is now known that eastern pyramids are not unique structures in containing burials and offerings since funeral temples and other structures that also enclose burials may have other orientations (e.g. Chase and Chase 1994: 56, 2011: 84). Nevertheless, it is fair to state that the Maya put special emphasis on the rites of veneration and in the custom of locating burials, especially of important ancestors, in eastern structures.