Residential Burials and Ancestor Worship:
A Reexamination of Classic Maya Settlement Patterns

Edwin L. Barnhart

Abstract

This paper discusses the Classic Maya tradition of residential burial and its implications for settlement pattern archaeology. Based on evidence that multiple generation residential units and ancestor worship existed at all levels of society, a post-residential function for abandoned houses is suggested. Though a lineage may have abandoned a particular house, the structure remained the burial site of important family ancestors. As such, abandoned houses became the primary locations for depositing religiously mandated gravesite offerings. Presumably, offerings to the dead in classic times resemble modern day rituals recorded in recent times by ethnographers. While archaeologists have typically interpreted the presence of metates, ceramics, organic residues, and localized burning as evidence of residential activity, these same items are recorded by ethnographers as offerings in ancestor veneration rites among the modern day Maya. If we reexamine the archaeological record in terms of the ethnographic evidence, our understanding of settlement patterns and population estimates is transformed. In other words, the practice of post-residential veneration, and the archaeological evidence it leaves behind, can create the illusion of a much larger and more densely clustered settlement than actually existed.

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When trying to understand Classic Maya settlement patterns archaeologists should recognize that residential structures are not only spaces for the living but also the primary locations in which to bury the dead. Unlike many other world cultures, the Classic Maya did not have communal cemeteries. Though burial locations vary, especially among the elite class, the vast majority of burial data from the period comes from within residential structures. The pattern is so well established, in fact, that lack of sub-floor burials has been used as a reason to invalidate a structure as residential (Satterwaite 1954, Haviland 1966). For the Classic Maya a residence was both home and tomb. As a result, the houses filled from two directions. While the birth rate expanded the family inside, the death rate expanded the family underneath. Over the use history of a typical residence the family will assumably grow, expand out to new structures, and continue the tradition of sub-floor burial (Haviland 1985). Once abandoned, though a structure was no longer a residence, it remained the tomb of deceased ancestors. It is suggested here, that because the structure continued to hold the dead, it would have been treated differently than if it were solely an abandoned residence. If the Classic Maya practiced ancestor worship, an assertion supported by archaeological data, there would be pressure on the surviving lineage members to revisit the house in order to deposit offerings and to communicate with their ancestors. This paper will first provide background evidence to support the argument for post-residential function and then conclude with a discussion of what the identification of such activity in Classic Maya society implies.

Residence as Burial

As early as 1931 researchers were recognizing sub-floor burials as a diagnostic component of a typical residential structure, along with benches, hearths, ceramics, metates, and organic residues (Thompson 1931, Satterwaite 1954). Burials have been found underneath almost every excavated residential structure at Tikal (Haviland 1972), Copan (Fash 1982), Kaminaljuyu (Stenholm 1979), Caracol (Chase 1992), and Seibal (Tourtellot et al. 1992). While burials are also found in ritual structures, plaza floors and even storage pits, those encountered in residential structures by far the most common. At each of the aforementioned sites the pattern of residential burial was found not just among the common people, but at all levels of society, in some right up to the royal family itself (Andrews and Fash 1992).

The same residential burial patterns are known to have persisted at least into the 16th century, when Diego de Landa noted a house burial tradition. Though modern Maya now commonly bury in Christian style cemeteries, remnants of ancient practices remain. The Lacandon of Chiapas (McGee 1990) and the Maya of central Yucatan (Powell p.c.), for example, both erect a small structure over the grave, a miniature house for the dead. The construction of those small houses can be regarded as ethnographic evidence implying the continuance of a Maya cognitive connection between home and grave.

Ancestor Worship and Maya Kinship Systems

Ancestor worship among the ruling class in Classic Maya centers is a practice with an abundance of evidence supporting its existence. Most archaeologists, epigraphers, and iconographers today support the same conclusion; deceased members of the ruling lineages were buried in places of importance and venerated at their gravesites. The tomb of Pakal in Palenque (Ruz 1952) exemplifies a well-documented pattern of royal burial treatment. In almost every
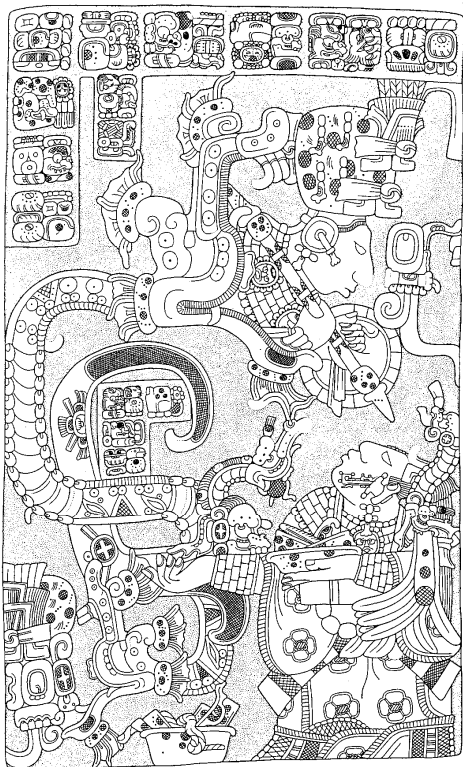
Figure 1. Yaxchilan Lintel 25 (drawing by Linda Schele

investigated Maya center researchers have found royal tombs, rich with offerings and accompanied by clear evidence of repeated visitation. Since the publication of *Blood of Kings* (Schele and Miller 1986) a growing amount of evidence has been collected supporting the assertion that the rulers were contacting specific ancestors via bloodletting rituals. According to Schele and Miller, both art and text demonstrate offerings were being given and rituals being performed in order to beseech the ancestors. One of the most compelling images which demonstrate ancestor worship is Yaxchilan Lintel 25 (Figure 1) in which Lady Kabal Xok calls the spirit of her lineage founder through the performance of a bloodletting ritual.

Outside of the centers, where residential units comprise the vast majority of structures, ancestor worship evidence is more difficult to identify. Settlement studies at Sayil (Smyth and Dore 1994), Caracol (Chase 1992), and Seibal (Tourtellot et al. 1992) have all concluded that size and distance from the center do not necessarily correlate with wealth and status. Researchers who have examined individual residential units caution that not all structures are living areas, interpreting some as kitchen or storage areas (Haviland 1972, Stenholm 1979, Sharer 1994). In addition, structures identified as lineage shrines are also commonly found within residential units. Becker (1971) was one of the first researchers to notice this pattern, concluding that in Tikal's periphery members of society were establishing lineage shrines and mausoleums. Sharer

(1994; 474) remarks that the same pattern exists at many Classic Maya sites and adds that lineage shrines were typically constructed on the eastern side of a residential courtyard.

During my own work at the site of Ma'ax Na, a Classic period center in Northwestern Belize (Barnhart and Barry 1997, Barnhart, Eckhardt, and Cackler 1998), my team and I documented many of these eastern shrines noted by Sharer (Figure 2). Of the six looter's trenches found in residential groups, all were cut into eastern shrines. It appeared as though the looters were confident that those buildings held the tombs they seek. The backfill of one trench had pieces of the large burial urn, indicating a cremation burial had indeed been found and looted.
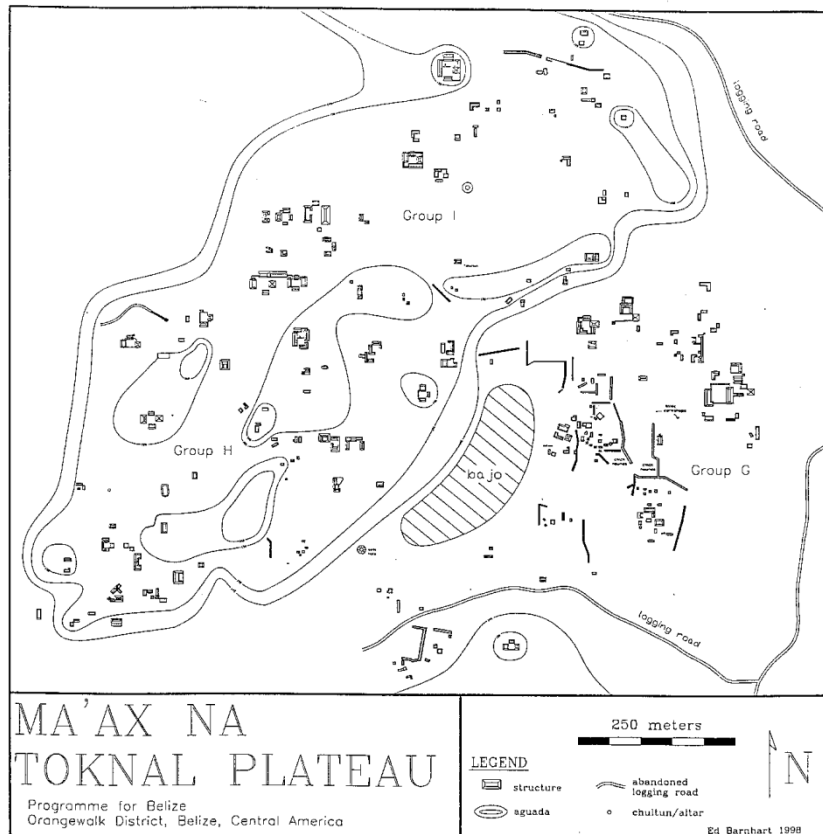

Figure 2. Map of the Toknal Plateau in Ma'ax Na with Residential compounds (Barnhart 1998)

Possibly the most convincing argument for society wide ancestor worship among the Classic Maya comes from Patricia Mcanany's book entitled *Living with the Ancestors* (1995). In that book she not only presents convincing archaeological evidence for pervasive nature of ancestor worship but goes on to trace its roots back into the Formative Period.

Transition from Residence to Shrine

Thus far this paper has argued that all levels of Classic Maya society bury underneath their houses and that all levels practice ancestor worship through the veneration of gravesites. Now we turn to the evidence most crucial to the hypothesis of this paper, what happens to a residential structure after abandonment as a living space?

Archaeological evidence from numerous site centers demonstrates that many elite residences, when eventually abandoned, are converted into ancestor worship shrines or temples. In 1997, I participated in an excavation at Dos Hombres (Durst 1997). Investigations that year were focused on the northern structure of Group B-4, an elite, centrally located residential courtyard. Our goal was to determine its function. The outer construction phase was a truncated platform mound, three meters in height. While clearly a part of the residential group, excavation produced no evidence of a structure on top. Excavation further into the platform's interior revealed that the previous building phase was residential. Before it was covered by the final construction phase, a burial was placed into the floor of the structure and the front door was sealed up with stone. The B-4 excavation is sited here as a clear example of a structure's discontinuance as a residence not resulting in it abandonment.

In the Copan 10L-32 plaza group Andrews and Fash (1992) documented the transition of elite residential housing into what they termed "public" or "ritual" structures

(Figure 3).   In the 10L-32 plaza structures were lived in, buried in, and built over through successive phases, all but the last functioning as residences.   In the complexes' final phase the two main residential structures were rebuilt as non-residential.   Though multiple burials, from children to richly adorned adults, were found in the earlier phases, the final structures contained none.   In their conclusions, Andrews and Fash site their study as evidence that elite residences evolve into ritual or public structures.
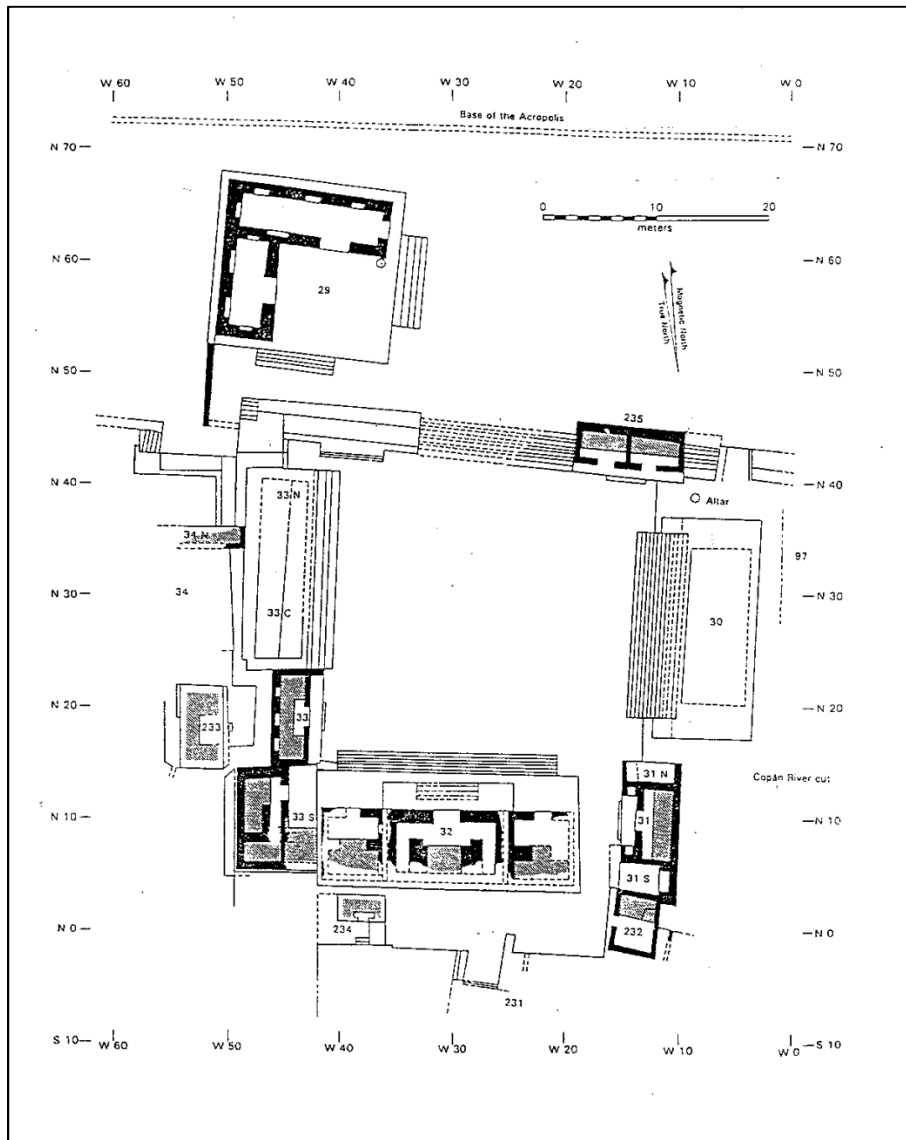

Figure 3. Copan 10L-32 Complex (Andrews and Fash 1992)

Post-Residential Use of Commoner Houses

       For those of privilege in Classic society, burials within discontinued houses were honored by building new structures over them. The lower classes, though driven by the same needs for ancestor worship, could unlikely afford the labor and resources necessary for such a commemorative construction. Their discontinued homes, still important as family tombs, would remain exposed to the surface. If we are not identifying new architecture being built over common residential structures after abandonment, what other archaeological evidence could researchers look for to identify the ancestor worship that we observe in the elite levels of society? Ethnography may provide insight.

       According Landa, the Maya commonly left food and objects related to their former lives as offerings to the dead at their gravesites. Offerings of this type were left several times a year, during feast and festival days. The tradition of leaving food, household items, and burned offerings for the dead persists here in Chiapas even today (McGee 1990, Vogt 1961). During his time with the Lacandon Maya, Jon McGee participated in gravesite ceremonies and wrote the following description:

       "As I participated in the funerary rites for a woman, the goods at the gravesite reflected her role in life. Along with candles and palm leaf dogs were placed a skillet, her favorite chair, her shoes, a kerosene lantern, and a plastic bag of corn dough (Figure 4). *Other gravesites in the cemetery had different objects. The graves of several children had toys left on the grave mounds, and those of adult men often had machetes and other tools, as well as their shoes and remains of food offerings. Finally, a fire is built next to the grave so the soul may rest and warm itself on its return journey from the underworld* (1990;118)".
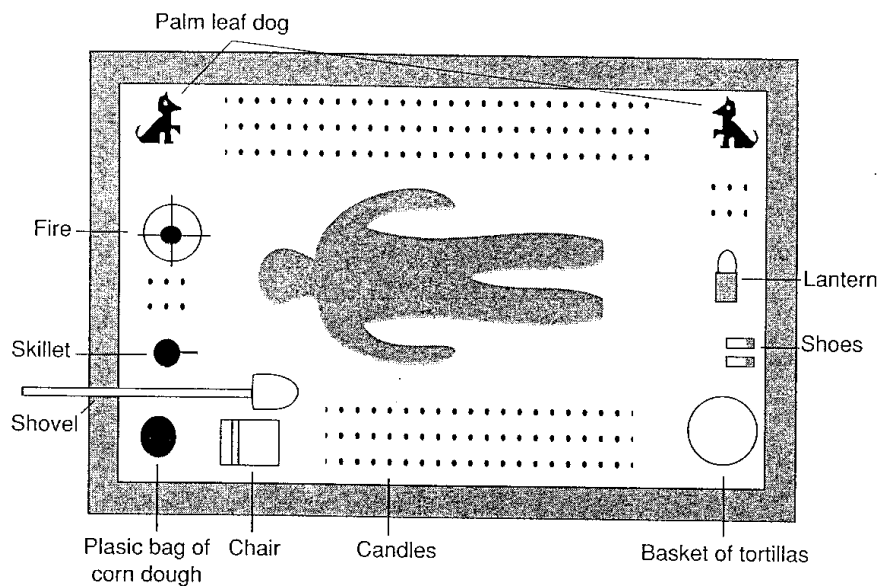
Figure 4. Lacandon Burial Diagram (McGee 1990)

If one were to try to identify ancestor worship offerings of the type ethnography describes, what could they look for? They could look for organic residues from food and flowers, ceramics, work related tools, localized burning areas, and perhaps the hearths and metates used to prepare food offerings. However, the list of evidence just given is alarming similar to the physical evidence we use to identify residential activity. Further, if diagnostic ceramics were periodically left as offerings, they would create the impression of longer and longer occupation. This potential "occupation or offering" misinterpretation recalls a classic pitfall for archaeologists, the issue of form versus function. If the evidence of residential occupation and burial veneration are essentially the same, how can archaeologists accurately assess whether a given structure's final function was residential or funerary?

A closely related issue is the Maya motivation for residential abandonment. The current models suggest that an extended family continued to live in the house well after burials have

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been interred.   In his text, *The Ancient Maya*, Sharer speaks against continued occupation writing:

"*The common people were buried under the floors or behind their houses; and the houses were usually then abandoned.*" (1994:485)

Ethnography also records pressure on the Maya to abandoned houses after an interment. Landa wrote:

"*They commonly abandoned the house after the funeral, except where many people were living there, in whose company they would lose some of their fear of death."* (1978[1566]:56)

Pressure to abandon homes after the burial of a family member survives even into today.   In January of 1985, the wife of Lacandon elder Chan K'in Viejo died and was buried. The next day Chan K'in Viejo was disturbed because he believed the spirit of his deceased wife had returned to the home. He claimed to hear her scratching at the wall all night and said the he would be forced to move if she continued to haunt the house.   Thus, though current archaeological evidence may favor continued occupation after residential interment, ethnographies from both colonial and modern times seem to contradict that interpretation.

Ancestor Worship and Lineage Residential Patterns

Most studies that examine the Classic Maya family unit discuss it in a static way, describing an extended family unit following a patrilineal descent pattern (Haviland 1985). The typical house is thought to have included children, parents, and surviving grandparents, much like extended family residence patterns worldwide. What differentiates the Classic Maya is the addition of relatives buried underneath. A drawing by Haviland illustrates a lineage group's housing needs over the course six generations (Figure 5). Though Haviland does not directly address the subject, by the end of six generations, in his model, there are as many dead lineage

members as there are living ones. If each generation wanted to continue the tradition of burying within their houses they had two choices, building over an existing house platform, a case frequently found during house mound excavations, or building a new platform in a different place. Either way, the early platform would retain its importance as the tomb of an actively venerated ancestor.

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A "lower class" household group and the people who may have lived there over the course of 8 generations. Genealogical symbols are as explained in Fig. 6; blacked-in symbols designate deceased ancestors. (Drawings by Laurean LaBar)
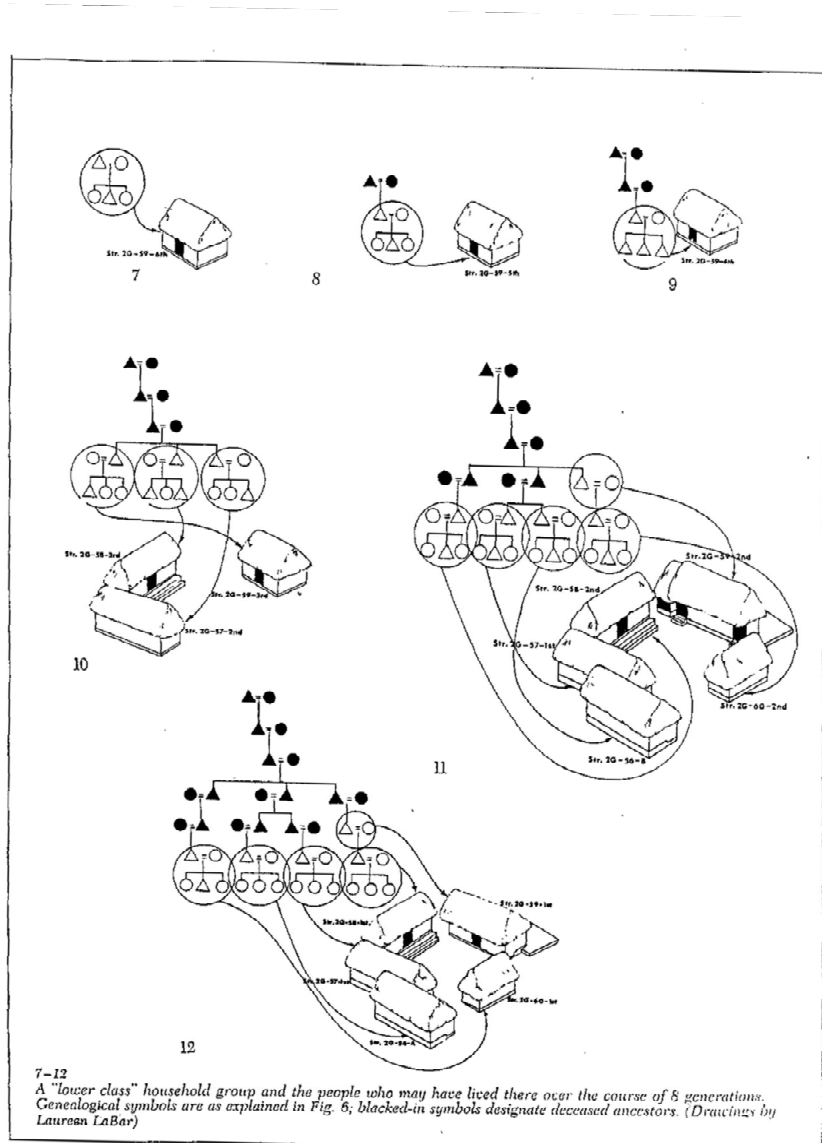
Figure 5. Hypothetical Evolution of a Residential Unit (Haviland 1985)

A Burial Oriented Model of Settlement Patterns

Sharer reports that most residential units, all construction phases accounted for, are thought to have been abandoned within 150 years after their construction (1994:468). In order to illustrate the possible effects of a residential burial pattern on an average Classic Maya community, the following hypothetical case is offered. Let's say we have a community of 1000 people organized into groups of patrilineal clans. At a conservative average of 5 people per house (Haviland 1985) the population would be occupying 200 residential structures. If the community were to survive for 150 years, even without population increase, there would be 200 new structures and 200 abandoned structures, abandoned but revisited for the purposes of ancestor veneration. At the end of 300 years there would be 600 structures, but still only 200 being used as residential structures. These numbers are based conservatively on a static population of 1000 people. If population increase, as is widely believed to have happened during the course of the Classic Period, were introduced into this burial oriented model, the gap between living and worship space is less but still significant. If, for example, the same community of 1000 doubled in population every 150 years at the end of 300 years the community would have 800 occupied structures and 600 post-residential gravesites. This model is, of course, an oversimplified case forwarded in order to illustrate the point that residential burials are an important factor when assessing Classic Maya settlement expansion.

Population Estimates and Settlement Density per Square Kilometer

Accessing population estimates and densities per area has been a long-standing problem for Maya archaeology. Most attempts recognize the importance of structure contemporaneity (Tourtellot et al. 1992, Haviland and Moholy-Nagy 1992). Obviously not all residences found at

a site were occupied simultaneously. Since archaeologists find settlements in their final form, the task of assessing population at a given point in time is difficult without extensive excavation. When dealing with populations typically in excess of 1000 people, total excavation is not a viable option. Current attempts to assess population simply count structures and reduce the number by arbitrarily chosen percentages (Adams 1987).   When one adds the evidence presented here of post-residential use to the equation, the issue of contemporaneity becomes even more important. If an ever-growing number of residences were converting into gravesites the implications for population estimates need to be addressed.

Using population densities reported for multiple ancient Maya centers and periphery zones, Anabel Ford arrived at an average of 425 people/km^2 during the Classic Period. Comparing that average to modern statistics shows that 425 people/ km^2 is a greater density than found anywhere else in the world, including Japan (330/km^2), the United Kingdom (237.7/km^2), and Germany (227.7/km^2) (Webstat.net 1999).   It seems quite unlikely that the jungles of the Peten were the most densely populated areas in world history. Considering the Maya were an agrarian society, with significant cropland requirements, the extreme density conclusions currently forwarded become even less likely.   Ford suggested that this incongruent evidence could be explained by the practice of seasonal residence, with families occupying structures only part of the year and based on annual resource availability (Ford 1986). The existence of post-residential burial shrines, appearing archaeologically as living spaces, is suggested here as an equally viable explanation for our population density dilemma.

Conclusion

This paper has argued a case for the importance of burial practices when trying to understand Classic Maya settlement patterns. If we are to accept the archaeological evidence that ancestor worship existed at all levels of society, we must also expect evidence of the activities it is associated with on all levels. Ancestor worship, as a practice, involves going to the gravesite of lineage members and leaving offerings, likely of food, flowers, ceramics, and items from the deceased's former life (Landa 1978[1566], Vogt 1961, McGee 1990). In the case of the Classic Maya, for whom the house was the preferred location for burial, their abandoned houses became the appropriate places for surviving lineage members to deposit those religiously mandated offerings. Since the offerings were things also common to everyday life, archaeological evidence of such activities could be easily confused for evidence of continued occupancy. The result of such misidentifications on a community scale would significantly inflate population estimates and create the impression of an extremely dense settlement pattern.

In the same way that the centers became increasingly full of burial shrines to members of the royal lineages, the same process was likely going on in the periphery. As the living community expanded through individual family size growth, the deceased population kept paces, with family members remembered and actively venerated. If a community existed long enough under such a system, it would inevitably reach a time when the remembered, venerated dead in the community outnumbered the living. As studies of ancient Maya culture continue, the recognition of an ever expanding deceased population, all of whom require veneration, may come to be included among the factors involved in the mysterious abandonment of city centers at the end of the Classic Period. If the Maya home and its conversion to ancestor worship is the microcosm, is the city and its "abandonment" the macrocosm of the same tradition?

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