

Altun Ha

BELIZE

a guidebook to the ancient maya city



David M. Pendergast
with an introduction by Jaime J. Awe

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INTRODUCTION

TO THE SECOND EDITION OF THE ALTUN HA GUIDEBOOK

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This guidebook provides a synthesis of the results of investigations by Dr. David Pendergast at the ancient Maya city of Altun Ha. Working under the auspices of the Royal Ontario Museum, David conducted intensive research at the site from 1964 to 1970. In many respects, the ROM Altun Ha Project represented a pioneering effort in what was then archaeologically unknown territory. As David noted in his first volume of the Altun Ha Reports, previous explorers and archaeologists had all avoided the wetland coastal zone of northern Belize in favour of the more pleasant hinterland to the west. The Altun Ha Project diverged from this previous geographical bias. It further dispelled the notion that development along the eastern coastal sub-region of the Maya area was essentially peripheral to the great achievements noted in the cities of the central Peten. Indeed, Altun Ha surprised all of us, David included. Seven years of research at the site revealed that the inhabitants of this medium-size city were exceptionally affluent. The source of this wealth was the successful exploitation of both marine and terrestrial resources. Craft specialists around the city converted the abundant local flint into utilitarian and ritual objects. These, and marine products, were then exported to many communities that required these materials for purposes that span from the mundane to the ideological. Its active participation in an extensive system of trade and exchange also allowed Altun Ha to maintain contact with its neighbours to the north, south and west. Their commercial success is best exemplified by the fact that Altun Ha still boasts of having the largest single piece of carved jade yet discovered at any Maya site.

Today's visitor to Altun Ha is presented primarily with a view of the ancient site core.

In the 1960's, Mayanists perceived site cores as empty ceremonial precincts where ruler priests conducted important rituals on behalf of a populace that predominantly resided outside of their centers. Today this view has changed substantially. We now know that site cores were, in many respects, similar to the downtown area of most large communities. They included administrative buildings, residences for rulers and other specialists, plus temple shrines and ballcourts that served ritual purposes. On prescribed days, one or more of the large courtyards likely served as the location for temporary markets where local and exotic goods were bartered and traded by the general public. In effect, site cores were actually the centers of vibrant communities.

Since David Pendergast's initial work in the sixties there have been substantial changes at Altun Ha, and in our knowledge of Maya prehistory. Changes in our knowledge of the ancient Maya are incorporated in the more recently edited text. Changes at the site were the result of a major program of stabilization by the Ministry of Tourism and the Institute of Archaeology. Between 2000 and 2004 most of the monumental architecture, including Structures A1, A2, A3, B1, B2, B3, B4, B5, and B6, were stabilized and conserved. Because of these efforts, Altun Ha now stands as silent testimony of the great achievements of Belize's ancient Maya inhabitants. We welcome you to share the wonders of our heritage, and thank you in advance for helping us preserve the past for the future.



ALTUN HA

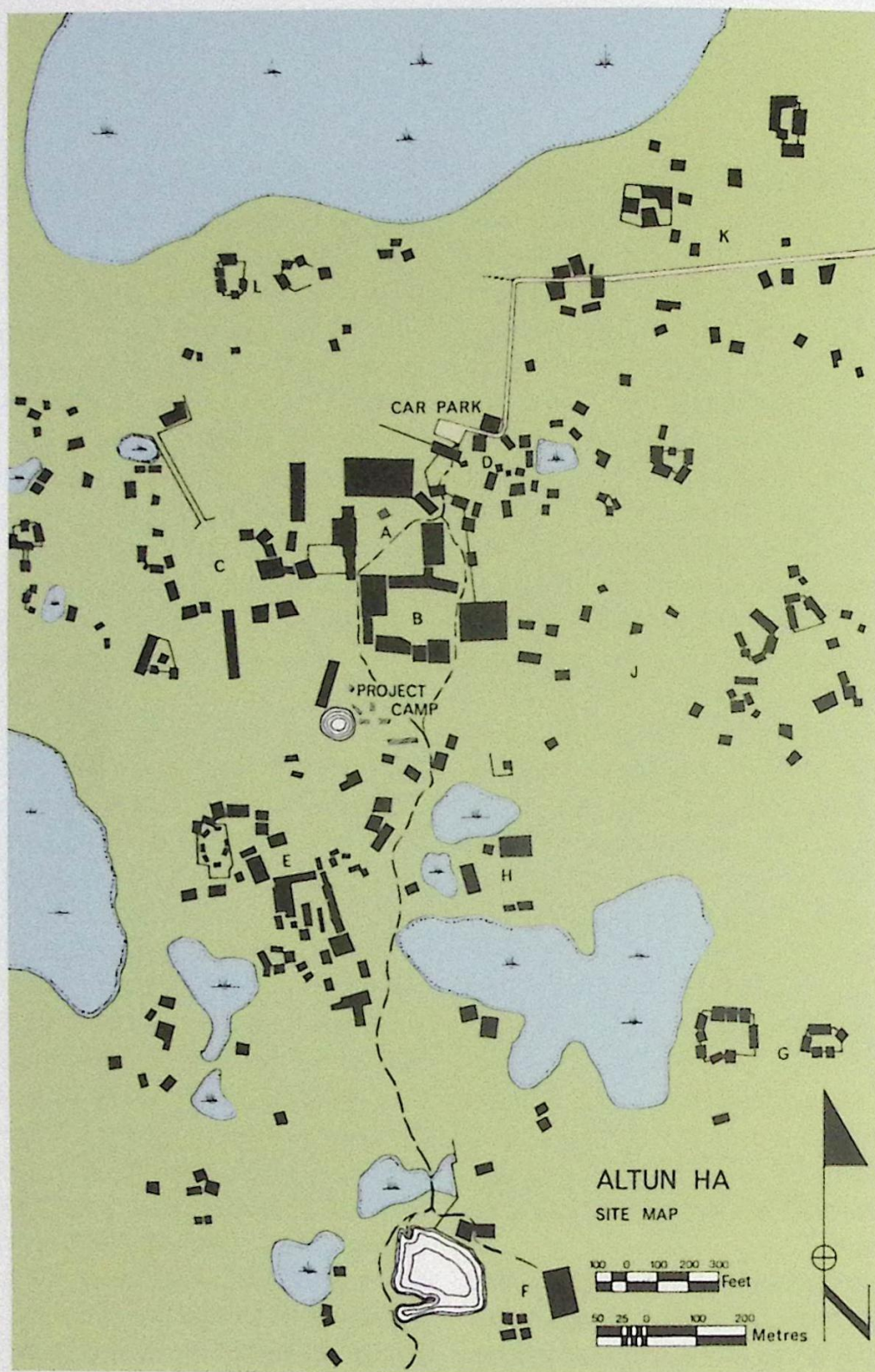
A GUIDEBOOK TO THE ANCIENT MAYA CITY

Dr. David M. Pendergast

In the century and a quarter which has passed since the explorations of John Lloyd Stephens and Frederick Catherwood first revealed to the world the jungle-shrouded remains of Maya civilization in Guatemala, Mexico, and Honduras, archaeological excavation has gradually assembled bits and pieces of the puzzle of the growth, decline, and disappearance of a rich and complex culture in the seemingly harsh and alien setting of the tropical rainforests. With lamentably few exceptions, such excavation has been concentrated in the heartland of the Maya region, leaving the peripheries untouched and unknown. In 1964, the Royal Ontario Museum, of Toronto, Canada, set out to examine a portion of the eastern edge of the Maya area, selecting as the focus for an extended programme of investigation a site in northern Belize surrounded by the modern Creole village of Rockstone Pond. The name of the modern settlement, roughly translated into Maya, has given a name to the ancient city; as is true of most Maya sites, the name given to Altun Ha by its builders is unknown. What is known, however, as a result of the excavations, is a great deal of the prehistory of a comparatively small, but surprisingly rich, minor centre of Maya civilization on the Caribbean shore.

Altun Ha, located approximately 35 road miles north of Belize City, is now easily accessible via an all-weather road leading from the Northern Highway, and transportation for the hour-and-a-half journey can be obtained without difficulty in the capital city. No overnight accommodations are available

at the ruins, but a variety of tourist facilities have been provided, including a parking area, drinking water, bathrooms and a visitor center. The central ceremonial precinct with its temples and small structures is fully open to the visitor, as are limited areas south of the site centre, including the principal reservoir which provided water for the ancient inhabitants, accessible by trail from the central zone. Hidden by the dense bush cover are myriads of small mounds, some of which are remains of minor ceremonial buildings, while the majority are residences of the upper and middle classes of Altun Ha society. Within the square kilometer area of densest occupation surrounding the central precinct, there are more than 275 such structures, while the remainder of the site, including at least a part of the sustaining area (the region in which crops—corn, beans, squash, and others—were grown for support of the settlement), covers roughly an additional five square kilometers, and contains perhaps 250 to 300 visible mounds, plus very probably a large number of house floors or very small mounds now totally concealed by bush and accumulated soil. Since the exact boundaries of the site cannot be traced with any precision, and since the count of mounds is almost certainly incomplete, there is no solid basis for an estimate of the size of the ancient population, even if it is assumed that all small mounds represent residences, and that all were occupied at the height of the civilization. A reasonable, albeit shaky, guess suggests a population of 8,000 to



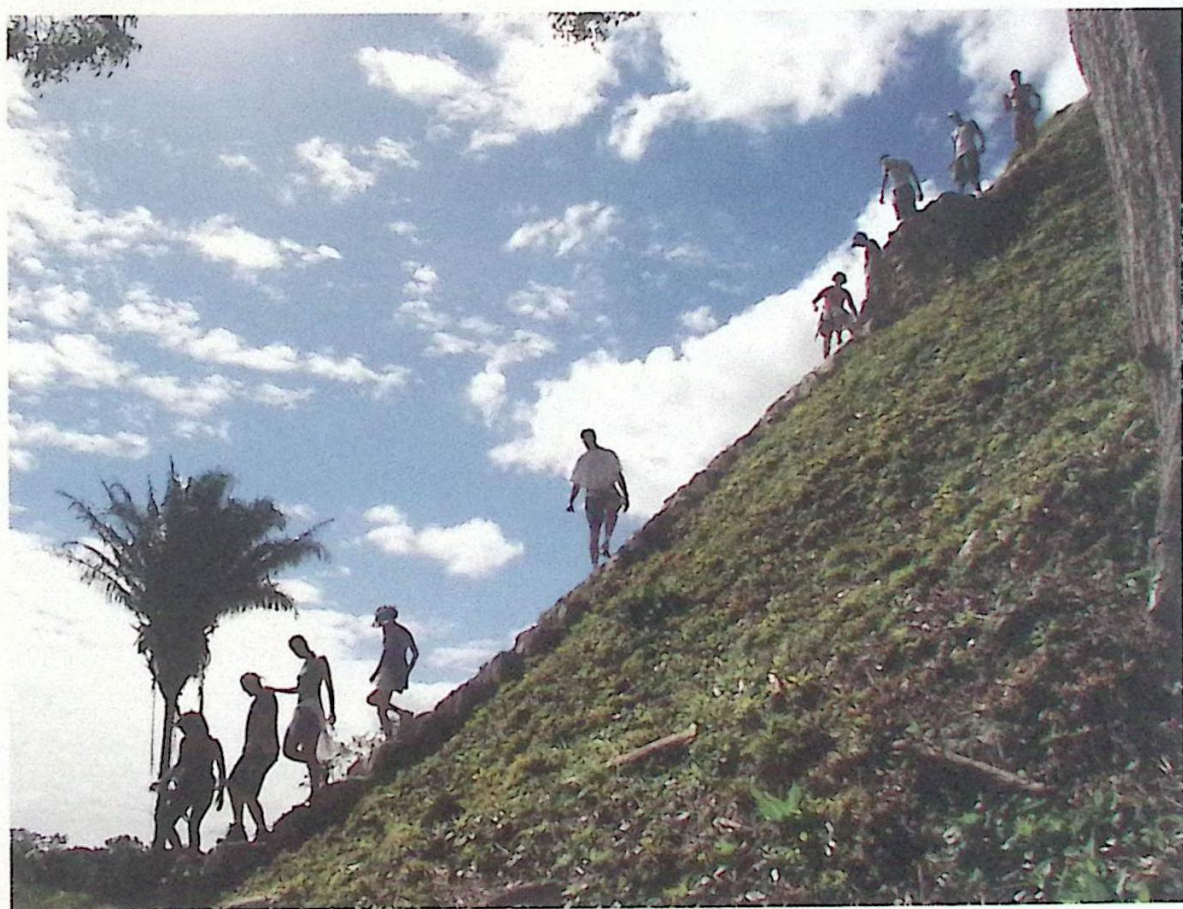
Map of the central portion of Altun Ha, showing trail leading to main reservoir and Zone F.

10,000 at the peak, with probably no more than 2,500 people within the central square kilometer.

We do not know when the first inhabitants entered the Maya area, nor precisely whence or why they came, but we assume that these first people were hunters and gatherers, or possibly horticulturists, and much more dependent upon wild plant foods than were their agricultural descendants. The roots of Maya civilization are so deeply buried in time that they are seemingly unrecognizable, and the earliest archaeological remains are those of settled groups already in possession of a comparatively elaborate culture. In the Guatemalan highlands, such early materials may date from as early as 1500 B.C., while in the central lowlands, the zone in which Altun Ha lies, the earliest known deposits are dated at 600 B.C.

Whether Altun Ha was occupied at this early date is not known, though there are indications that a fairly extensive settlement was present here by perhaps 200 B.C. As in all Maya sites, the evidence for early occupation, often consisting of little more than bits of pottery and an occasional burial, lies deeply buried beneath later construction, and its discovery is almost always a matter of chance.

By the first century B.C., if not earlier, the inhabitants of Altun Ha had begun to erect permanent buildings, with the major concentrations apparently occurring around the principal reservoir and in a zone east of the central precinct. The reservoir itself is artificial construction in part, with a clay lining and a dam at the south end, and it may be that this activity was part of the initial effort at the site. Other, smaller reservoirs, many of



View of the south face of Structure B4.

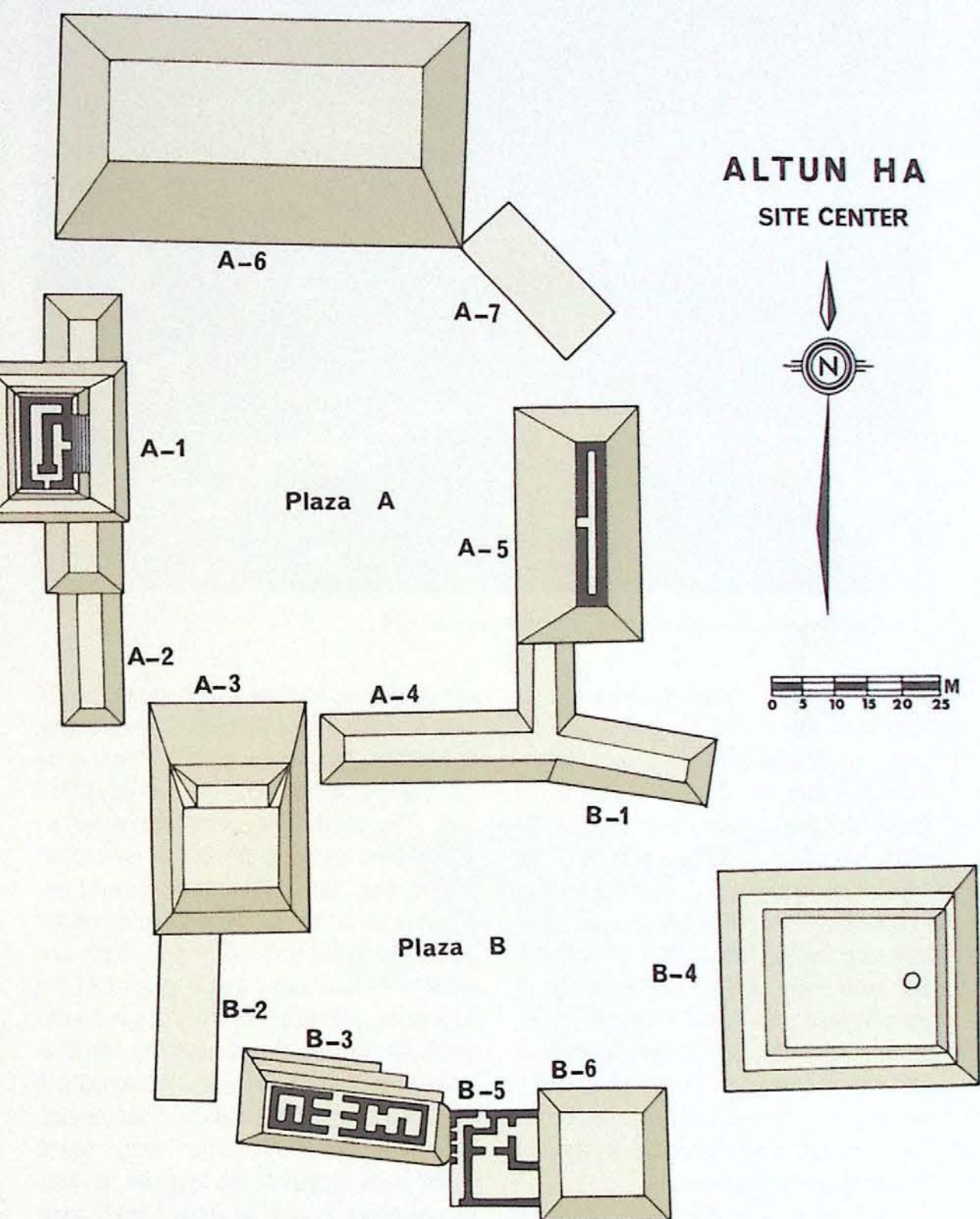
them apparently quarries for building stone, which were modified for use as rainwater catch-basins, are scattered around the site, and we can be sure that here, as elsewhere, availability of water was a major determining factor in the location and growth of the settlement. Of equal importance, but less easily documented archaeologically, was land suitable for agriculture, which was probably cultivated in a manner similar to that still practiced in the area today, involving the shifting of fields at frequent intervals.

The beginning of the second century A.D. saw a settlement of sufficient size and stability to undertake the first major construction effort in the form of a temple near the main reservoir. This appears to have been the focus of the ceremonial life of the site in late Pre-Classic and Proto-Classic times, lasting until about A.D. 250, when the period of full flowering of Maya civilization, the Classic, began. Probably at or near the beginning of the Classic, work was begun in what was to be the central precinct of the site for some six centuries, an effort culminating in the group of temples, priestly residences, and other buildings that the visitor sees today. Construction began in the northern plaza (Plaza A), and the four temples which face on this plaza appear to have formed the ceremonial precinct until a time close to the end of the Early Classic, about A.D. 550, when the precinct was extended southward, and building of a fifth temple was begun at the east side of the second plaza (Plaza B).

All of the major temples, including the early structure south of the site center, are, like most of the smaller buildings, actually not one building but several. The Maya seem to have believed that temples had a sort of life span; that is, they could be used for various ceremonial purposes for a period, and then ceased to be suitable for such

use, and had to be modified in some major way, or covered over entirely with a new structure. Thus most of the temples began as buildings of moderate height, and grew to their final forms as a result of successive additions over the centuries. In all cases, the basic form of the structure was the same: a solid pyramid, or substructure, atop which a chambered building or an altar was placed. The pyramids did not have a function similar to those of Egypt, and contain, as far as we know, no chambers, but rather are simply a mass of boulders and soil, faced with shaped limestone blocks, originally capped by a layer of burnt-lime stucco. One of the principal aims of the excavation programme has been the unraveling of the sequence of reconstruction in various temples, a process involving stripping away all or part of later additions to reveal hidden earlier buildings. In so doing, we move backward through time, with each reconstruction probably in the neighborhood of fifty years earlier than the one overlying it. In some cases, such probing has carried us back more than three centuries in a single building, while elsewhere we have found that construction efforts were ceased after a few phases, for reasons yet unclear.

The rebuilding of at least some of the temples continued until near the end of the 9th Century A.D., though for possibly as much as a century and a half prior to this the size and quality of new building had been declining, apparently as a result of the weakening of the organization which had bound the society together. The priest-rulers of Maya society, under whose direction not only ceremonies but also cyclic reconstruction of buildings were carried out, had begun in late Pre-Classic times to exercise extensive and rigid control over the remainder of the population, and it was a religious belief, rather than military force, which supported the civilization. In Late Classic times,



Map of the central ceremonial precinct at Altun Ha.



View of Plaza A and Structures A1 and A2 from atop Structure B4.

perhaps in part as a result of increase in the number of elite and in the gulf separating them from the middle and lower classes, discontent may have begun to gnaw at the social structure, bringing about the decay which ultimately resulted in collapse of the civilization between A.D. 900 and 950. Excavations have produced some evidence indicating that the final collapse at Altun Ha may have been brought about by a violent peasant revolt, something not clearly in evidence at other sites; the archaeological data also demonstrates with reasonable certainty that military invasion, famine, and pestilence played no significant roles in the downfall of Classic Maya society here.

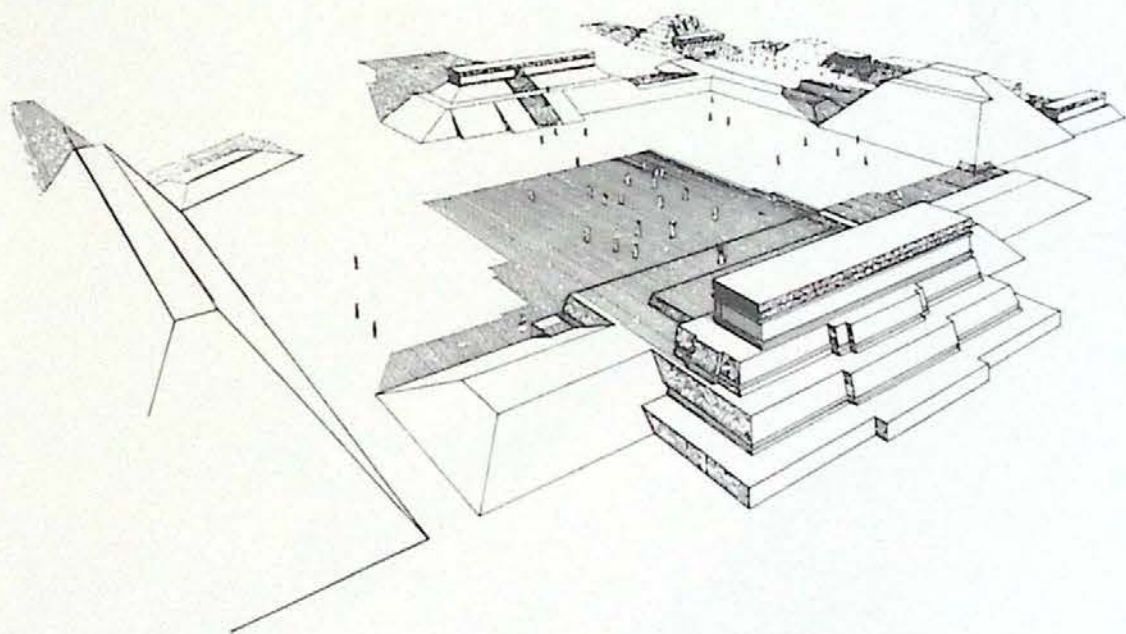
Many aspects of the fall of the Maya civilization remain unclear, due in large part to the fact that an event of this sort, and the processes leading up to the event, leave little or nothing in the way of direct

archaeological evidence. The same can be said of occurrences following the collapse, though there are some parts of the picture that can be pieced together from scattered data. The older concept of abandonment of the sites following the fall of civilization clearly does not fit at Altun Ha, for traces of occupation in the Post-Classic period have been found both in the site centre and elsewhere. It appears that a portion of the population, perhaps members of the middle and lower classes, remained at the site after major ceremonial activity, and the rebuilding and maintenance of temples, had ceased. From masses of domestic refuse found at the base of one of the temples, it looks very much as though the early Post-Classic inhabitants lived in or near the ceremonial precinct, dumping their garbage on what had once been sacred ground. Given the probable level of agricultural knowledge of

the average ancient Maya farmer, it is likely that no major disruption of the agricultural cycle accompanied the collapse, and that people would have been able to continue life much as before, without the leadership once provided by the elite.

It may be that portions of the Altun Ha population remained at the site throughout the Post-Classic, though evidence for the 11th and 12th centuries has not come to light; in any case, we know that there were people at the site in the 13th and 14th centuries, though at this time they seem not to have been building houses or other structures, but rather re-using residences of Classic date. Domestic refuse from this late occupation includes pottery related to types being manufactured further north, in Quintana

Roo, as well as what appears to be locally-made vessels, suggesting that the people were remnant of the Classic period population, rather than immigrants or pilgrims from northern centers. Pilgrimage may have been practiced in the centuries before the Spanish Conquest of the Maya area, as offerings have been encountered atop the fallen walls of temples, and in the black soil overlying the plaster floors of plazas, the accumulation of centuries of tree growth and decay. What became of the last inhabitants, who had certainly disappeared before British presence became an important factor in this section of the Caribbean coast, remains a mystery, and one which probably could not be solved by excavation either at Altun Ha or at neighboring sites.



Perspective view of the site centre from the northwest, as it might have looked about A.D. 650.



THE RUINS

PLAZA A

The visitor to Altun Ha enters the ceremonial precinct from the north, climbing a gentle slope from the parking area into Plaza A. While part of the slope is natural, the section north and east of Structure A6 appears to be an artificial platform underlying A6 and A7. Within the plaza itself, the ancient Maya raised the existing surface more than two metres, covering the entire area with plaster flooring, and the later reflooring the plaza at least twice. The uppermost, or latest, plaza floor now lies covered by about 25 cm of accumulated soil, and has been largely destroyed by root action, but it is clear that the stairways of the temples bordering the plaza once gave onto a large expanse of polished lime plaster flooring, atop which the commoners of Altun Ha society may have stood on important ceremonial occasions, watching rites carried out on the stairways and in the rooms of the temples.

The carved stone monuments which grace the plaza at most Maya sites seem not to have been in common use at Altun Ha, for none has been discovered in either of the central plazas, though one carved or unfinished stela lies, broken in several pieces, at the base of a low platform south of the central precinct. The reasons for absence of stelae and altars at Altun Ha are far from clear, but it may be that this, like other sites on the fringes of the Maya area, was a community in which erection of such monuments played no major role in ceremonial activity.

Unfortunately, none of the temples in Group A was found with roof and upper walls intact, probably in large part as the result of

the prevalence of wood-boring insects along the coast, a highly destructive force in the wooden lintels and tie-beams which supported and bound together the corbelled vaults of the temples. Temple A1 exemplifies this sort of destruction; the stones of the vault were found within the rooms of the multi-chambered superstructure, and the upper portions of all walls have suffered so extensively in the centuries since the roof collapse left them exposed to rains and roots that in some areas little more than stubs remain.

As you see it now, the structure is actually a composite of several building phases, a combination which would never have been visible in ancient times. The substructure, originally marked by a broad stairway extending about halfway up the building, dates from about the early 6th Century A.D. and represents the final building effort in this portion of the temple, except for the wings added at north and south at an undetermined later date. The stepped pyramid once supported a superstructure, perhaps much like the one now visible, but built atop a floor about a meter lower. Between this and the final form of the chambered element, another structure was built, of which we have no evidence save fragments of its floor. Once the final form of the superstructure had been achieved, the builders contented themselves with modifications to the upper part of the substructure, adding numerous minor elements at the sides and then covering the upper stairway with a large block, into which a narrow set of stairs were let at the south side. The final alterations consisted of a new surface on the large

block, and additions to the side stairway. The last of these may have been coupled with a massive effort at the south and west sides of the pyramid, where huge quantities of stone were roughly set in mortar, forming crude buttresses apparently designed to support shifting and settling sections of the façade.

Within all of this, represented now by two fragmentary stairs, a tiny area of platform floor, and some rubble fill, lies what may have been the beginning of the temple, a building perhaps no more than three-quarters the height of the final structure, but apparently not generally unlike other phases. Also deeply hidden, though of much later date, was the single tomb encountered in the seven constructions phases investigated. Built as part of the construction activity of Phase IV, which resulted in the covering of the upper stairway with a large block of masonry, the tomb appears to date from A.D. 550-600, the earliest discovered in the site center. Portions of the cut made by the ancient Maya during the building of the tomb can be seen at the base of the stairway below the temple, in a large floored space below which the tomb was constructed. In a manner typical of tomb construction here, but at no other known site, the walls of the crypt were formed of unshaped limestone boulders, held in place with lime mortar. A ceiling of huge slabs of flint and dense limestone, the largest measuring over 2 meters in length, nearly a meter in thickness, and 20 cm or more in thickness, was set atop the walls, while the floor consisted of a layer of lime soil. Though extremely crude in comparison with the tombs of other sites, which resemble the vaulted rooms of buildings, this, like the other tombs at the site, was marked by surprising richness of contents.

Within the crypt lay the badly decomposed skeleton of an elite, arrayed in those portions of his finery which had not succumbed to the tropic humidity. All of the cloth, skins, and wooden objects which we know

were common elements in a noble's raiment had disappeared, leaving no visible trace beyond the mass of multi-colored soil which overlay the burial. What remained were the non-perishable objects: shell necklaces and ornaments, pearls, jade beads and pendants, pottery vessels, stingray spines (used in bloodletting ceremonies), and groups of large ceremonial flints. One of the pottery bowls held the smashed remains of a codex, an ancient book, presumably containing ritual information, or perhaps records of the astronomical observations and calculations which were such an important part of Maya ceremonial life, and the bases for their intricate and highly precise calendric system. The paper of the pages, made from the inner bark of the wild fig, had long since rotted away, leaving only the extremely thin stucco coating which was applied to give a smooth surface for writing. The fragments of the coating, no thicker than an average sheet of modern paper, can probably be reassembled into their original form, but they tell us at least that codices were occasionally buried with rulers, as they were in northern Yucatan at the time of the Spanish Conquest. The presence of nearly three hundred jade objects in the tomb, most of them small beads or pendants, led us to call this the Green Tomb, and this in turn gave to the structure the name Temple of the Green Tomb.

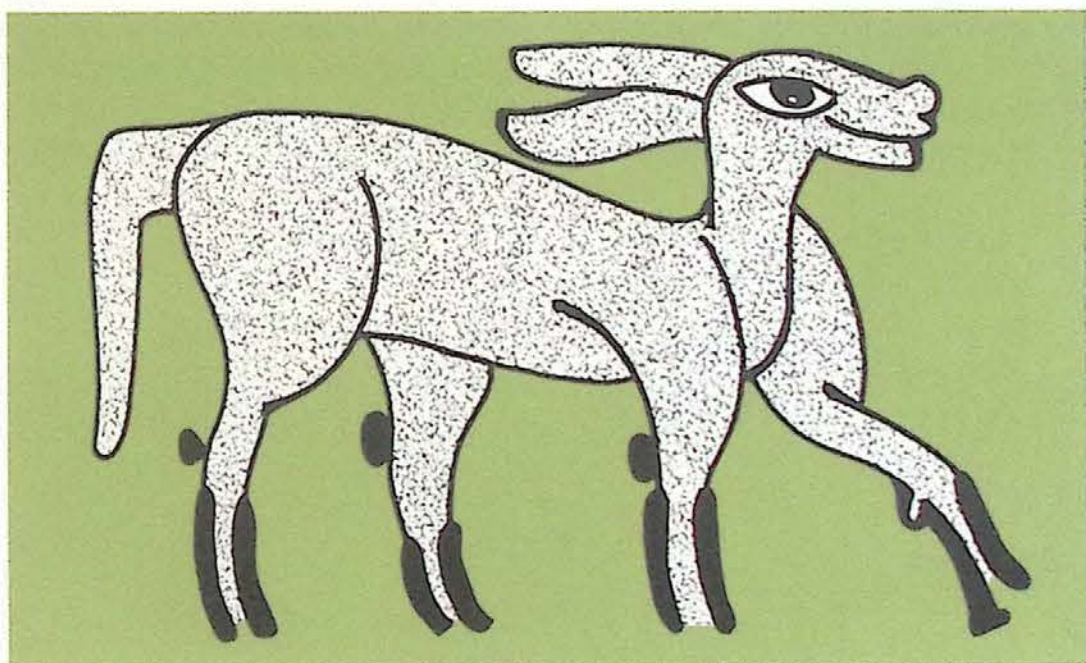
Structure A2 consists of a large, complex platform, atop which there is no evidence of a superstructure. The final form of the platform includes a long, low structure at the eastern side, with a stairway, now largely collapsed, which leads down into the plaza. While the structure appears to be simply an extension of the south wing added to the main substructure of A1, it is in fact a series of separate elements which ultimately expanded to join the A1 construction. Concealed within the central portion of the platform is an earlier structure, also apparently a platform without superstructure, now partly revealed as the result

of uncontrolled excavation by local residents, who report that a burial was encountered in the hearting of the outer shell of the complex. Many of the elements of A2 have not been fully explored, and nothing has been discovered which suggests a date for either the beginning or the end of building activity here, but it is likely that the final phase of construction antedates by some time the last efforts on the neighboring A1.

Structure A3, the smallest temple in Group A, has been left virtually unexcavated, largely as a result of the extent of work in other buildings around the plaza, which has revealed at least the major portion of prehistory of this part of the central precinct. A test cut made in the base of the substructure stairway produced data indicating that the temple is roughly contemporaneous with its companions in the group, but beyond this we know nothing of the course of its growth and modification through time. As it stands today, it is an excellent example of the appearance of all the structures in the central precinct prior to excavation, with all but the broadest outlines of its form concealed by the products of a thousand years of tree growth and decay,

roots prying their way into roofs and walls, and rains washing away exposed portions of the building.

The central precincts of smaller Maya sites frequently consist of a single plaza, bordered on all sides by one or more structures. At Altun Ha, the precinct deviates from this pattern both in the presence of two plazas and in the form of the southern border of Plaza A, marked by structure A4, which turns northward at its eastern end to form part of the east plaza border as well. A4 appears to have been nothing more than a long, low, narrow platform, with steps leading up from Plaza A to the top, and perhaps thence down into Plaza B. The platform was originally butted against A3, as it is against structure A5; again, efforts of local villagers have obliterated a portion of the ancient construction. A trench cut into the outer section of A4 revealed a plaster-floored upper surface, with no indications of either a masonry or a thatched structure atop it, and it appears that the platform served solely as a border for the plaza throughout the Early Classic, and as a separation between the two plazas of the Late Classic. As no extensive cut was made into the structures, nothing is



Deer motif from pottery vessel. Date: A.D. 650-700.

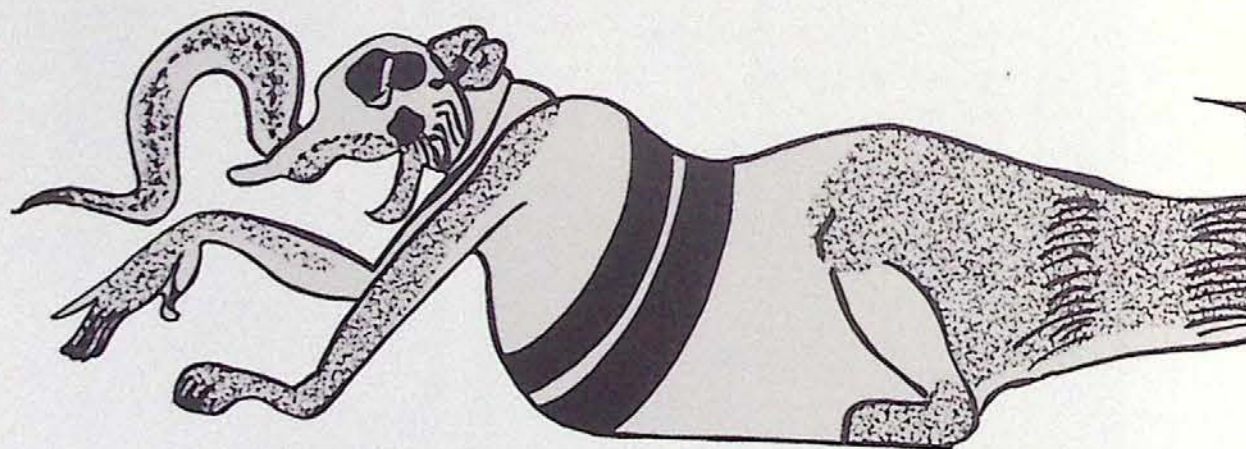
known of possible earlier phases, or other hidden elements.

Structure A5, larger in bulk but only slightly taller than A3, is unusual in a number of ways. It is clear that the building was a temple, both from its location and from the general similarity between it and other structures in the central precinct, with a large, solid substructure surmounted by a chambered building. At this point, however, similarities between A5 and the other temples of Plaza A cease. With the exception of a few minor additions at the northwest corner, the substructure is a single construction, concealing, as far as we know, no earlier buildings, and resting entirely atop the uppermost plaza floor. Thus, it appears that A5 was built in a single stroke after the plaza itself had reached its final level, and probably long after work on other temples in Group A had begun.

Apparently connected with the plaza below by a broad stairway, the building at the top of A5, fronted by a narrow floored area, consists of a single long room, so narrow as to make movement within it uncomfortable, especially for a priest in costume, whose headdress and elaborate clothing were cumbersome enough in a much larger space. Yet despite the strange, seemingly unusable form of the room, we can be reasonably certain that, as in other temples, the building was the scene of ceremonial activities. Furthermore,

the presence of sash-holders at the inner sides of the central doorway indicates that draperies or curtains were employed as a door closure, strengthening the feeling that the room was designated for ceremonial use requiring concealment from those in the plaza. What the use might have been we cannot guess, for there is no indication in the form of the structure of the deity to which the temple was dedicated, nor of the rites carried out here. The same is, unfortunately, true of many temples in Maya sites, and of all of those in Plaza A.

While the use and significance of A5 are not clear, excavations have produced data bearing on the age of the building. A cut made into the heart of the substructure yielded nothing beyond a few sherds of pottery, of types not sufficiently distinctive to be dated, but excavation in the heart of the lower stairway revealed not only a dedicatory offering enclosed in two polychrome plates dating between A.D. 500 and 600, but also a burial accompanied by a few shell objects and a single black-ware bowl, of 6th Century date. The practice of placing offerings in major temples was not common at Altun Ha, and even those encountered in smaller structures do not generally include pottery vessels of datable types, so the discovery in A5 was particularly fortunate. The burial may also have been a form of offering, though there is no indication



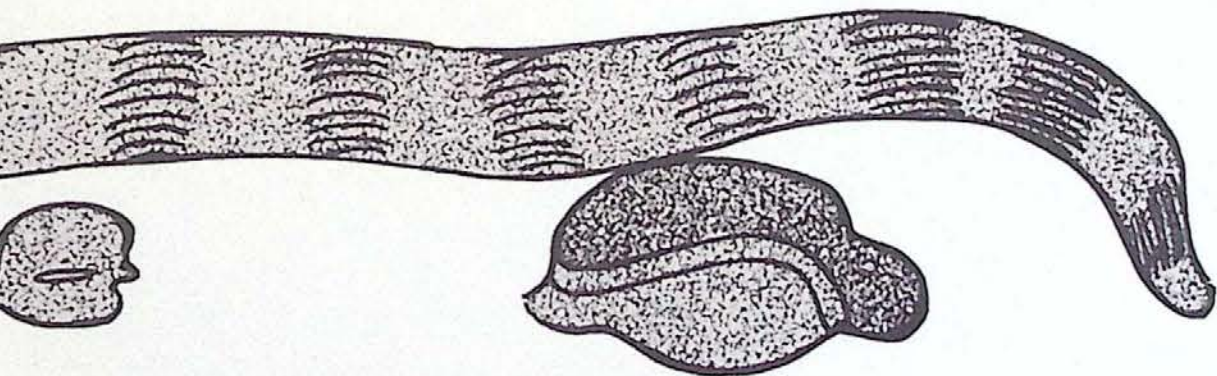
Mythical monster motif from a pottery vessel, possibly a sea creature. Date: A.D. 550-600.

that the individual, probably a woman, met violent death, and our excavations indicate that human sacrifice was extremely rare or unknown at Altun Ha, as apparently at other sites in the central lowlands.

Little was known of Structure A6 at the time of this writing, as excavation here was not contemplated when the programme was first planned, and it was not until work elsewhere in the site centre had indicated that A6 was very likely to have been the principal temple of Early Classic times, that the decision was made to investigate the building as thoroughly as possible during the final two seasons of the project, 1969 and 1970. On the basis of surface contours, which have been demonstrated in other structures to be reasonably good indicators of the form of the building, A6 appears to consist of a massive substructure, topped by either a single chambered superstructure or possibly as many as five small temples. With the exception of a few very small areas of what appear to be platform facing, no structural elements are visible on A6, and a small excavation by local villagers near the top center of the mound likewise revealed nothing except boulder-soil fill. A6, with a volume of more than 25,000 cubic meters, is likely to have seen the sort of multiple reconstructions in evidence elsewhere in the central precinct. The massive size of the structure, coupled with the fact

that it forms most of the northern border of the Early Classic plaza, suggests strongly that A6 should yield significant data on the first few centuries of ceremonial activity, including temple construction, in the Classic Period. Beyond this, nothing can be said of this structure at present.

The final element composing the perimeter of Plaza A is a small, low mound lying just east of Structure A6, angling across the northeast corner of the plaza. Though symmetry of site plan seems not to have been a major concern of the Maya, the placement of A7 is outside the range of asymmetry visible elsewhere in the central precinct, for reasons which cannot now be determined, due to almost complete destruction of the building by local diggers. The form of remaining portions of the mound suggests that this, like A4, was a simple platform, with no masonry structure atop it. Mound width relative to length is great enough to have permitted construction of a superstructure, but if one did in fact exist, it must have been of perishable materials, of which the sole evidence would be likely to consist of postholes in a plaster floor now destroyed by uncontrolled excavation. The ruined condition of this structure reduced archaeological potential to virtually nil, and not even limited testing has been carried out in A7, so that no statements can be made regarding possible age, or construction history.



PLAZA B

Turning to Plaza B, we encounter a somewhat more varied group of structures, and possibly a somewhat more complex construction history. The plaza itself differs markedly from its northern counterpart, in that it appears to have been floored only once, apparently at a time fixed by construction activity in Structure B4, discussed below. The two plazas differ also in orientation; in each case, the longer dimension of the plaza is marked at one end by a major temple, but in Plaza A this dimension is north-south, while in B it is east-west. Portions of the plaza floor are visible at the base of Structure B4, and from these one can gain an impression of the quality of the surfacing which once extended over the entire open area.

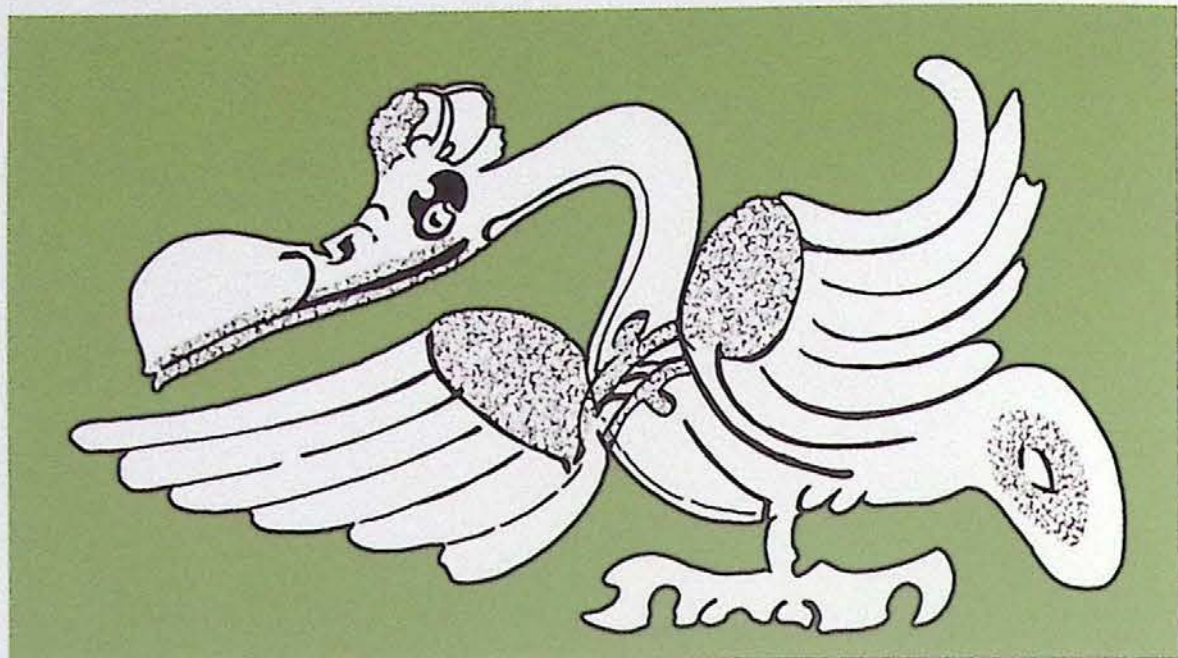
From the map it can be seen that the low divider mound between the two plazas is in the form of an inverted T, with the base abutting A5, and one part of the crossarm originally attached to A3. The other element, lying at a slight angle with the remainder, appears to be a separate structure, and has been designated Structure B1. The distinction between A4 and B1 rests not only on the difference of alignment, but also on the greater height of B1, and indications that this structure may have been somewhat more complex than its neighbor, possibly having a small chambered building atop the platform. No excavation has been undertaken in B1, but data from B2 and B4, discussed below, may be an indicator of the age of the structure.

In Structure B2 we encounter another example of destruction by local digging, just one year before the museum's programme

was initiated. In an attempt to learn something from the shattered remains of the building, we straightened and extended earlier cuts, revealing three phases of construction, of which the central part of the platform face now visible at the west side of the building is the earliest. This section was later added onto at both the north and the south end, bringing B2 nearly into contact with the rear face of A3. Subsequently, the structure was covered at least in part, with a somewhat cruder facing, of which only bits remain. Unfortunately, the uncontrolled excavation destroyed any evidence from within the platform regarding age of the two later phases of construction; however, our excavations demonstrated that the entire complex was built atop the plaza floor, and hence must be later than the plaza construction. By relating this to information from the temple facing B2 across the plaza, Structure B4, a reasonably secure estimate of the age of B2 can be made, placing the start of the construction around A.D. 600. As the center and upper portions of the building had been totally destroyed, we cannot be certain of the form of use of B2, but its resemblance to structures B3 and B5, discussed below, may be significant.

At the southern limit of Plaza B lies a row of structures markedly different from those investigated in Plaza A. Originally assumed to be either a single building, or at most two, the one elongated mound has been shown to contain three structures, numbered B3, B5, and B6 from west to east. Structure B3 consists of a long platform, about one and a half meters high at the back (south), and





Mythical Moan Bird from a pottery vessel. Date: A.D. 600-650.

approximately half that on the plaza face, atop which sit the remains of a multi-chambered building, probably originally entirely capped by a vaulted roof, of which no portions now remain intact. The general form of the structure and of the individual rooms indicates that B3 served as a residence, almost certainly for some portion of the ruling family. Such structures are encountered at other Maya sites, often bordering ceremonial precincts, and have frequently been termed "palaces," a rather unsuitable identification, as it conjures up a picture of the use and nature of the buildings which is not likely to be correct. More recently, the term "range-type building" has come into favor in categorizing elongated residential buildings on raised platforms, as it avoids the implications of the earlier description.

As in the temples, reconstruction over time is in evidence in Structure B3. An earlier building, of unknown form and size, is concealed with the platform, and it is apparent that the platform itself is the product of at least two separate efforts, with an addition to the east, and possibly to the west, to the original center section. Excavation beneath the floor of the rooms revealed no offerings or burials,

and yielded very little in the way of datable pottery, and hence placement of B3 in time rests almost entirely upon its relationship with its neighbor to the east, B5. Examination of the platforms of the two structures shows clearly that at least the final phase of B5 was built after the latest additions to the platform of B3, a fact which may suggest that B5 was simply a sort of extension necessary to accommodate a growing family or kin group in B3.

In B5, known as the Ik Palace because of the presence of ventilator shafts in the room walls in the shape of the Maya symbol for wind, Ik, the number and form of rooms are radically different from those in B3, with an emphasis on the long, narrow rooms best suited to the corbelled vaulting utilized by the Maya. The two central rooms, one opening out onto the plaza and the other onto a large patio area behind the residence proper, are bordered east and west by rooms both of which appear to have their long axis north-south, though in fact the eastern room was once three separate small chambers, the walls and roofs of which were razed perhaps not long before the end of the Classic, when the resulting large room was used

as a garbage dump. At the opposite end, the very narrow room facing B3 is a puzzle, as the doorways in the western wall could never have led to a walkway, and seemingly did not even provide direct access to the neighboring residence. The southern part of this room, actually a small entry at the west, was almost certainly unroofed, like the patio. In the patio are two rectangular sunken areas for which no use is readily apparent, though it is worth noting that during the rainy season, if the patio were not protected by a thatched roof, the sunken areas would collect a good deal of rainwater, which might have been used for drinking or other purposes.

Excavations beneath the floor of B5, into the hearting of the very low platform underlying the rooms, revealed a complex pattern of construction involving three earlier floors, the earliest of which appeared not to have extended over the full area of the building. Since it was not possible to examine the full extent of any of the earlier phases, it may well be that one or more of them were smaller than the final form, and perhaps contemporaneous with construction of B3. Other than a single burial of a child, no objects besides fragments of pottery were encountered in the building fill. The pottery may indicate the date of construction; if so, B5 was begun surprisingly early, for many of the sherds from beneath the floor of the final structure are of Early Classic date, probably between A.D. 250 and 400. Such a date for the final construction of B5 would mean first of all a very early beginning of building on this spot, in view of the three underlying floors, and secondly an almost unbelievably early, though not impossible, date for B3. Placement of these two buildings in the Early Classic would, in turn, mean that they stood for some time separated from Plaza A by an unfloored level area, with no structures at either the eastern or western edge, and came to form part of a plaza enclosure only when the major temple (Structure B4) was

begun at the east. It seems rather more likely that we have here one of the many instances in which pottery from a dump of much earlier date was scooped up and included in the soil used in building a late structure. On balance, the final phase of B5 can probably be placed closer to the time of the start of temple-building in Plaza B, near the end of the Early Classic, which would date B3 as perhaps 5th or 4th Century A.D.

Structure B6, the remaining element in the southern border of Plaza B, is unexcavated. From its greater height and different form we can assume that it is not of the type exemplified by B3 and B5, and it is possible, though a bit unlikely, that it is a small ceremonial, rather than a residential, structure. No guess can be made regarding the age of the building, as obviously it might be contemporaneous with B3 (and there are, in fact, some small indications that B6 was present before the building of the final phase of B5), or much later.

The final structure in Group B is the tallest of the several temples, and clearly one of the major edifices in the central precinct, though of less total bulk than A6. Structure B4, the Temple of the Masonry Altars, saw an extended programme of excavations, beginning in 1965 and lasting through 1968, during which time its entire construction history (or so we believe) was probed. Like the Temple of the Green Tomb, B4 was rebuilt a number of times, and in several cases the effort involved was truly staggering. What the visitor sees today is but one stage in the sequence of reconstruction, and, unlike A1, a building as it was, except for the ravages of time, at one point in the distant past. The steps you climb, the vaulted rooms through which you pass, and the altar at the summit all date from about A.D. 600-650, and comprise the first major rebuilding of the temple following its initial construction near the middle of the 6th Century. As the phases must be numbered in the order of discovery by the archaeologist, this early

Seventh-Century effort is Phase VII, while the beginning is Phase VIII. Now entirely removed are the last six phases of construction, most of which were in extremely poor condition, and many of which were simply small additions at the very top of the building.

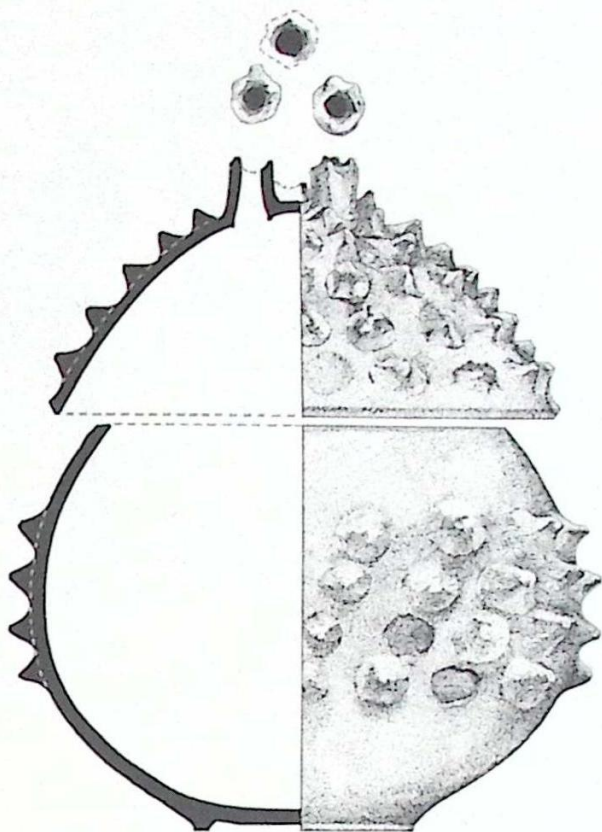
Of the form of the earliest building, concealed within the one now visible, we know comparatively little, save that there was a stairway down the front, and a round altar at the top. The altar of Phase VIII represents an innovation in Maya ceremonial building, and is the first in a series of four that adorned the upper surface of B4, and gave the temple its name. Apparently beginning with Phase VIII, though not clearly in evidence until VII, a unique form of sacrifice became the focal point of activity on B4, atop the round altar, offerings of copal resin and jade objects, including beautifully carved pendants which had been smashed into small pieces, were

cast into a blazing fire. In the final sacrifice on each of the altars, just prior to the covering of the building with later construction, the bits of jade, resin, and charcoal were scattered over the floor surrounding the altar, and left as a sort of fossilized ceremony, to be discovered some 1300 years later.

Phase VII began in a somewhat simpler form than that now visible, with a smaller stair block at the top center, lacking the masks at the sides of the lower stairway, with a smaller block in the center of that stairway, and without the two large vaulted rooms which sit atop what was originally a large platform or landing. Whether all of these elements were added simultaneously, we do not know, but it is clear that, following the construction of the vaulted rooms, a great deal of modification preceded the building of Phase VI. First, the front room (represented now by stubs of the blocks separating nine entry doorways)



Western façade of Structure B4.

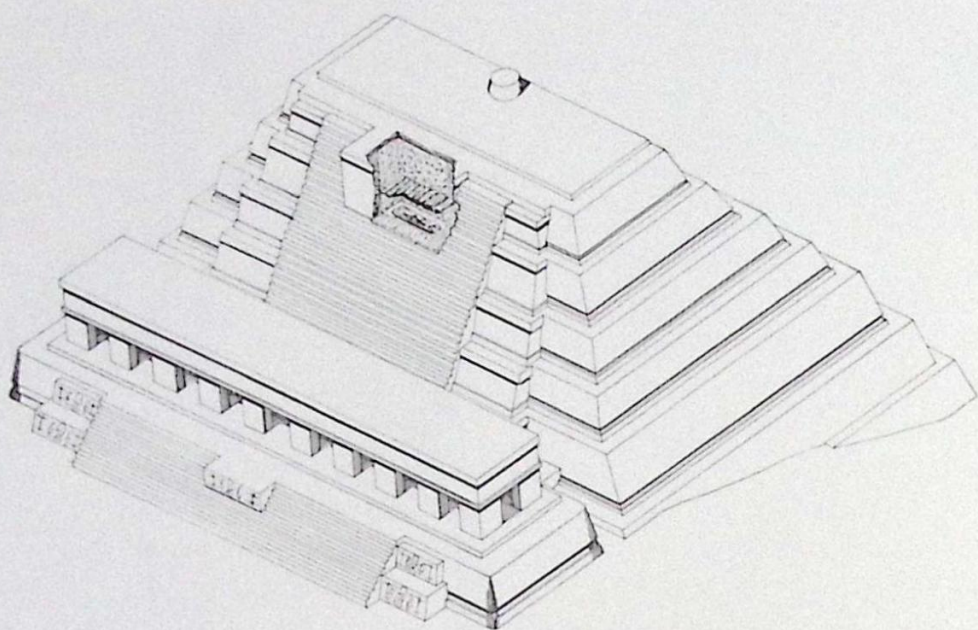


Two-piece censer (incense-burning vessel) from Tomb B-4/6. Made for a single use, these poorly-fired vessels are found in most of the tombs at Altun Ha, but are unknown elsewhere. (Drawing by Mary Yeigh)

was sealed off from the rear area, which was filled with stone. Two of the blocked doorways leading through the midwall between the two rooms can still be seen, while the third, at the center, has been cleared of its ancient seal to permit the visitor to climb to the upper part of the building. With this closing-off of the rear came covering of part of the upper stairway, and new stairs were built at the sides, rising behind the rooms and meeting the older stairway about one-third of the way up. Finally, after one of the nine front entry doors had been sealed, the roof and part of the outer wall of the remaining room were demolished, and a new covering was begun, concealing Phase VII from view, and marked by a new round altar at the top. The new building, Phase VI, apparently had much the same form as its predecessor, though it lacked the vaulted rooms. It marked, too, the last major effort at rebuilding, and its lower areas remained in use for the rest of the Late Classic, while modifications were made only at the top of

the temple. Here, Phase V included the last of the round altars, joined to a small added stairway, while the last four additions were simply small rectangular or square structures, concealing the last round altar, but substituting no other form. For at least phases IV-I, the feeling of decline in quality of construction, as well as in the size of the undertaking, is very strong.

Throughout the sequence of reconstruction of B4, the placement of priestly tombs in new building phases was a major part of the effort, and in fact for the last three phases possibly the sole reason for construction. Only one phase, V, did not contain a tomb, while the earlier, VI, housed two. The initial building, VIII, seems not to have a concealed tomb, unless at its very base, well out of the area in which excavation was possible; near its top, however, the builders had placed a large offering, encased in a mass of red pigment, and including shells, jade objects, and pearls.



Reconstruction drawing of phase VII of the Temple of the Masonry Altars, showing the location of the Sun God's Tomb in the large stair block near the top of the structure. Total height of the building is 58.5 feet.

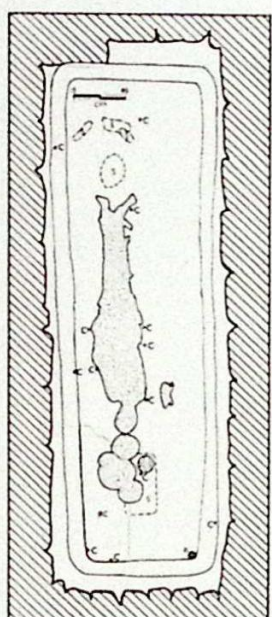
In general, the tombs of Structure B4 parallel in form that encountered in A1, though they were uniformly contained within the fill of a phase, rather than cut into the earlier building covered by that phase. Again, as in A1, the richness of tomb contents is surprising, and extends to shell, pearls, jade, flints, and a variety of other materials, though generally not to pottery. Though clearly capable of producing pottery vessels of high quality and great elaboration, the people of Altun Ha seem to have felt that such objects were not worthy of inclusion in tombs, or perhaps were not necessary in view of the great range of other materials present. The vessels placed in tombs tend to be simple, and often are not as elaborately painted as are fragments found elsewhere around the site. Almost invariably present in the tombs of B4, as in others found both within and outside the central precinct, are poorly-fired two-piece incense-burning vessels, sometimes of elaborate form; these seem to have been made solely for the burial of an elite individual, and not to have been in general use in the cycle of ceremonies. The same may be true of the giant ceremonial

flints, groups of which adorn all but one of the Classic period tombs, often occurring as caches buried beneath crypt floors or in walls.

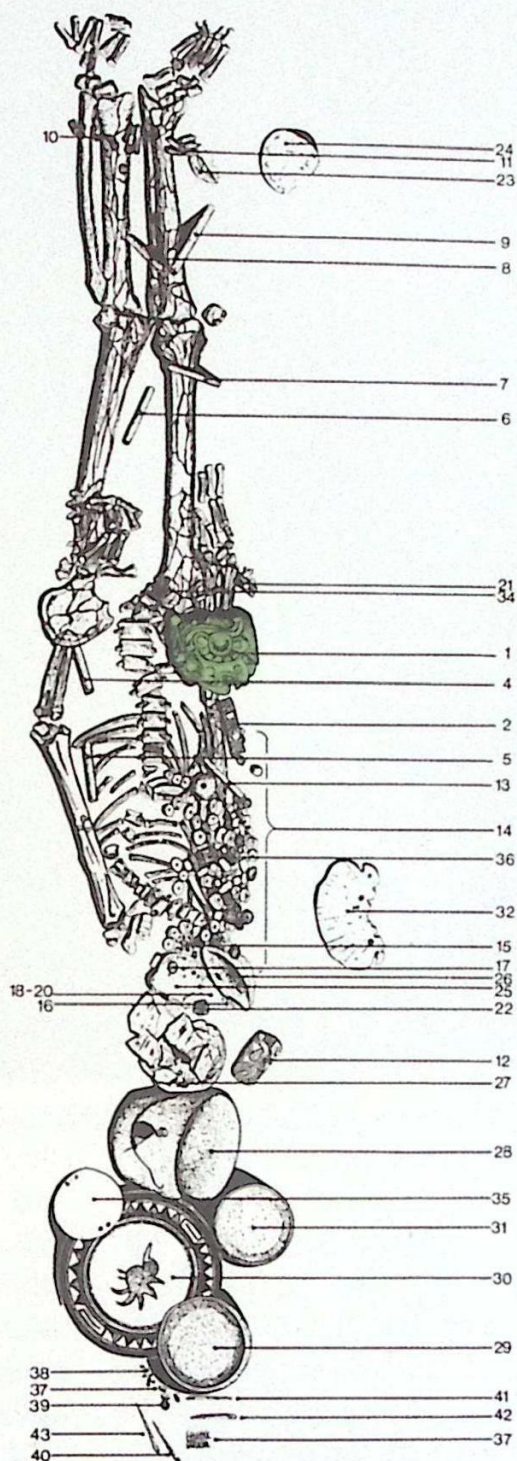
Of the seven tombs encountered in B4, one had been largely destroyed by collapse of the surrounding construction, and three, including the last two built atop the structure, showed unmistakable signs of having suffered desecration, involving destruction of contents, burning of some portions thereof, filling of the crypt with soil, and tossing of the roof slabs back into the pile. Such activity, clearly not the work of looters, very probably took place at the time of final collapse of Maya civilization at Altun Ha, and may well be an indicator that the collapse was, as suggested earlier, attended by some violence, perhaps taking the form of a peasant revolt. In any case, these late tombs, though virtually devoid of contents, constitute one of the more important bodies of evidence recovered in the entire programme of excavations.

Of all tombs, however, the most striking was the last one discovered, the earliest built. This burial, hidden deep within the huge stair

TOMB B-4/7



0 5 10 20 30 40 cm



Drawing of the Sun God's Tomb, showing positions of the artifacts over and around the skeleton. The insert at the left shows the skeleton and artifacts in the crypt, as well as areas of stuccoed objects ("s"), claws from jaguar skins ("c"), a bolt of cloth ("bc"), and the outline and one leg ("p") of the wooden platform which supported the burial.



The giant jade head of the Maya Sun God, Kinich Ahau, recovered from the tomb beneath the upper stair block of Structure B-4. Height 6 inches.

block at the top of the building, was part of Phase VII, dating from A.D. 600-650, and was constructed atop and against the largely demolished face of Phase VIII. Having cut a large and deep trench into the stair block in the hope of learning more about the earlier structure concealed by Phase VII, we came upon the roof slabs of a tomb which proved to be the richest, in several senses, yet encountered at Altun Ha, and perhaps in the central lowlands as a whole. Removing the mass of

debris resulting from collapse of one wall of the crypt, and from decay of many organic objects in the tomb, we came upon the remains of an elderly individual, accompanied by a number of jade objects, including the largest carved jade artifact ever recovered in the Maya area, a giant full-round head of the Sun God, Kinich Ahau, standing 14.9 cm high, and weighing 4.42 kilograms, or 9¾ pounds. Of equal importance, though less spectacular, were bits and pieces of the cloth, cordage,

and wooden objects which had surrounded and covered the body. In a few cases, actual fragments of cloth were somehow preserved, though for the most part the evidence consists of impressions, as is true of the various cords and shaped sticks which lay on the crypt floor. Also recognizable, though almost completely rotted away, was a large wooden platform on which the body had been placed, and from the groups of artifacts both within and beneath the crypt came fragments of the stucco coating of wooden artifacts, including several bowls. The rarity of such materials in the humid tropics makes these discoveries of great importance, though less impressive than the giant jade.

The discovery of the head of Kinich Ahau in the tomb has led to a series of speculations regarding Structure B4. Clearly such an object could be expected to have been buried with a priest of the Sun God, and hence we can assume that the other objects in the crypt are, in a less clear-cut way, markers of such priests. It also follows that priests of the Sun God should have been buried in a temple dedicated to that deity, and that the other tombs, of later date, should also contain remains of priests of Kinich Ahau. While all of these assumptions seem logical, none can be proved correct; it is worth noting, however, that the headdress which adorns the masks at the sides of the lower stairway of the structure resembles that depicted on the giant jade head, perhaps supporting identification of the Temple of the Masonry Altars as the Temple of the Sun God. If this is so, it raises at least one unanswerable question regarding the altars and the sacrifices carried out on them, for neither is reported from other sites, and neither seems fitting in association with the Sun God. What such suggestions, and the discoveries on which they are based, may indicate more than anything else is the tremendous gaps which still exist in our knowledge of the ancient Maya.

One final point regarding Structure B4, in answer to a question posed by almost every visitor who essays the climb to the top of the buildings: the Maya were small people in comparison with North Americans, and yet the steps of the B4 stairway seem high even to the tallest of the visitors. If you are seeking a reason for that mild feeling of pain in legs and back, you should recognize that stairways such as that on B4 were not meant for daily use, nor probably for rapid climbing by any but maintenance crews. Most of the inhabitants of Altun Ha climbed the stairway only when required to do so in reconstructing the buildings; at all other times, the temples were closed to them, sacred places to be visited and used only by the priests and perhaps their retainers. The priests themselves almost certainly did not dash up and down the stairs, but rather used the steps almost as a stage for ceremonial processions, moving with great pomp and dignity upward a stair at a time, and perhaps retreating from the altar much as visitors do today, stern first and slowly.



Polychrome plate with a hummingbird as the central motif. From the Sun God's Tomb, which dates from about A.D. 600-650, but the plate is of a style dating from approximately a half-century earlier.

ZONES E AND F

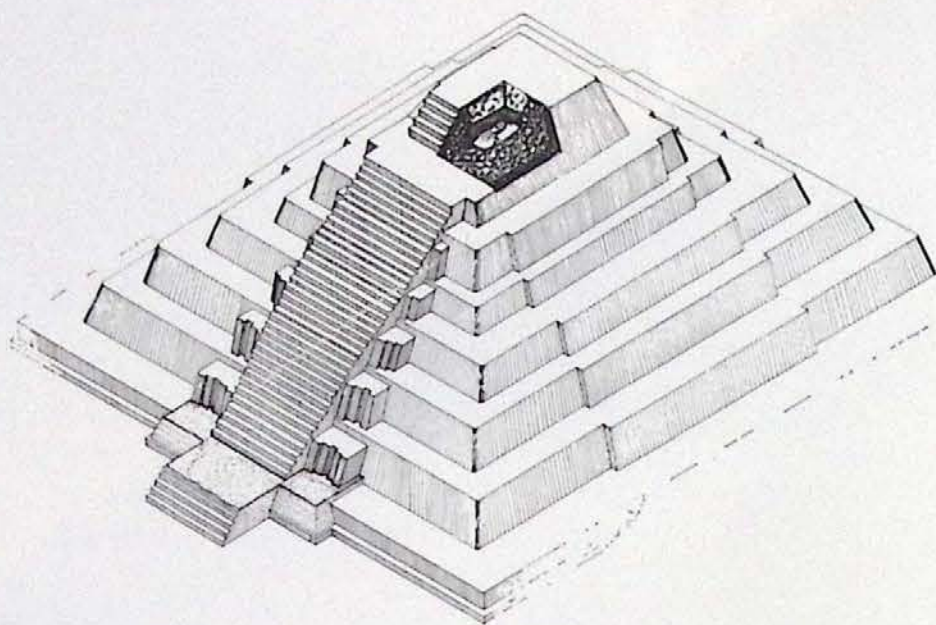
Apart from the central precinct of the site, many other portions of Altun Ha lie within the government reserve, but much of the area is covered by dense second-growth bush, into which the visitor should not attempt to penetrate. However, a trail leads southward from the passage between B4 and B6, connecting with a bush road which passes through the reserve, ending at the main reservoir used by the ancient inhabitants, and a walk to the reservoir, a distance of approximately four-tenths of a mile, will provide an opportunity of seeing a few of the smaller structures, as well as the reservoir itself and the mounds surrounding it. Visible along the sides of the trail are several small mounds, many of which have been partly or completely excavated. On the west side of the trail lies Zone E, an area of dense concentration of residential buildings of the middle class, with at least one small plazuela complex (four or more buildings bordering a small plaza) apparently once occupied by families of the ruling class. Among the 48 structures in the zone is at least one minor ceremonial structure which, like many of the residences, contained a large number of burials. Most of the more than two hundred burials recovered at Altun Ha come from Zone E, with the greatest number, 53, encountered in the minor ceremonial building. Here, as in the major temples, rebuilding over time is in evidence, covering the three centuries from A.D. 550 to 850. Most of the houses are also multi-phase structures, with the rebuilding in these cases apparently dictated by the death of the head of the family, who was buried beneath the floor, while

others were often interred in benches built within the rooms of the structure. From such burials, as from extensive refuse dumps surrounding many of the buildings, has come a great body of information on the lives of the large middle class at Altun Ha.

Like most of the other zones, Zone E is delimited by swamp on all but one side, and in fact swampy areas extend over much of the region between this zone and the main reservoir, with only scattered mounds occurring on small areas of higher ground. The reservoir itself is bordered on the west and south by large overflow areas, probably inundated more frequently now than in the centuries when the pool provided water for much of the ancient community. Probably originally a small spring-fed natural pond, the reservoir was enlarged, dammed at the southern end, and lined with clay by the Maya, forming a large and excellent source of water until centuries of neglect brought it to its present muddy, fish-infested state. Though certainly a focus of much activity in the community, the reservoir seems, on the basis of investigations carried out by a team of divers, not to have been the scene of sacrifices or offerings.

Several mounds near the pond have been examined, among them the large structure (F8) known as Temple of the Reservoir. Originally selected for excavation because of the presence nearby of a mound which yielded evidence of very late occupation, the Reservoir Temple was at first thought to face the pond, and possible to have been somehow associated with ceremonies involving





Reconstruction drawing of the large temple near the main reservoir (Structure F-8), Phase II. The tomb built as part of the phase can be seen at the top, while at the base of the stairway a portion of the later, overlying Phase I is shown. Height of the structure is just over 55 feet.

the water supply. Such assumptions seemed logical, in view of the position of the structure and the known importance of the reservoir in the life of Altun Ha. However, initial investigations revealed that the temple faces north, away from the pond, and there is nothing in its form or limited contents suggestive of associations with water. The guess as to age proved incorrect also, for our probing showed the building to be the oldest major structure at the site, apparently having been started about A.D. 100, and resting atop two floors of even earlier date, with the final construction effort, a new stairway capping that now visible, dating from A.D. 200 – 250 or slightly later.

Due in large part to its age, the Reservoir Temple was in poorer condition than any other major temple at the site. For this reason, excavation was extended deeply into the building, partly in recognition of the fact that such trenching would not destroy a restorable structure, and also in the hope of encountering a concealed earlier phase in a better state of preservation. Unfortunately, the builders of this early period seem to have

been much more inclined than those of later times to demolish most of the façade of a structure prior to covering it with a new building, and none of the phases encountered retained more than fragments of terraces and stairway. Thus F8, though of major significance to the archaeologist, seems little more than a jumble of bits and pieces to the casual visitor.

Even the single tomb discovered in the second phase of F8 is rather unimpressive in comparison with the Classic Period priestly burials. Lacking in this Proto-Classic interment are the huge flint slabs and boulder walls characteristic of later tombs; absent too are the giant ceremonial flints and the quantities of jade objects encountered in the Classic. Instead, the block and earth walls may have supported a log or plank roof, atop which lay thousands of flint chips, as well as groups of jade beads, pottery vessels, and other artifacts, while within the crypt were a few additional bowls and jars, a simple necklace of shell beads and tiny carved jade human heads, and masses of unworked oyster

shells, an import from the Pacific Coast. As far as we can determine, this burial represents the beginning of priestly interments at Altun Ha, though surely other such burials are concealed somewhere among the hundreds of other structures; in any case, it is clear that the F8 tomb marks a step in the evolution of the unique tomb form characteristic of Altun Ha for the six centuries of the Classic Period.

Though the presence of a modern village in the area surrounding the archaeological reserve has reduced the wildlife population and altered the appearance of the bush, there remains within the reserve much to be seen in addition to the ruins. Birds abound in the area south of the central precinct where the bush has been left standing, and small animals such as squirrels are often seen. Occasionally, the visitor is rewarded by the sight of a

larger animal, perhaps an armadillo, a gibbon (paca) or bush rabbit (agouti), or even a peccary. The wild things inhabiting the forest should not be molested, but left for others to see and enjoy; if hunting is to be done within the reserve, let it be with binoculars and camera. Similarly, the ruins themselves must be preserved for generations yet to come, and should be treated today with the same respect and awe accorded them by their builders. The great temples, and even the humble dwellings, stand as testimony to the skill and perseverance of the ancient Maya in wresting a living from, and creating a rich and complex civilization in, a forbidding jungle setting. Surely, having survived centuries of use and more than a millennium of abandonment to the forces of the jungle, the ruins deserve the efforts of all of us to prevent their destruction at the hands of modern man.



Structure B4.

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This fully illustrated guidebook provides a synthesis of Dr. David Pendergast's investigations at the ancient Maya city of Altun Ha. Working under the auspices of the Royal Ontario Museum, Canada, Dr. Pendergast conducted intensive research at this site from 1964 to 1970. In many respects, the ROM Altun Ha Project represented for Belize a pioneering effort in what was then archaeologically unknown territory.



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