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Chapter 4

THE BOX NI GROUP OF NARANJAL, AND EARLY ARCHITECTURE OF THE MAYA LOWLANDS

Jennifer P. Mathews

The distinctive Early Classic megalithic style of the northern Maya Lowlands did not exist in isolation, but rather shared a number of features with monumental architecture of the central Petén. One particularly striking example is the triadic platform grouping, found at Naranjal as well as Uaxactún and other early sites of the northern and southern lowlands. The temporal and geographic distribution of Maya triadic platform groupings are reviewed in conjunction with such shared architectural features as rounded corners. These comparisons support the early dating of megalithic architecture and help define the special characteristics of this northern lowland style.

The relation of ideology to architecture has long been a central concern for archaeologists. In the Maya region, some scholars feel that ideology played a significant role in determining how architectural sites were laid out. One particularly interesting architectural pattern, as seen in Figure 4.1, is the triadic grouping. This is a configuration seen at sites throughout the Maya Lowlands, including the site of Naranjal, in Quintana Roo, Mexico (Figure 4.2). In this study I will examine the distribution of triadic groupings and attempt to show that this architectural plan is typical of the Late Preclassic and Early Classic periods. I will also explore some of the hypotheses that attempt to explain the meaning behind this triadic pattern.

I define an architectural triad as a raised rectangular or T-shaped basal platform that supports

three structures in a triangular formation. All three of the buildings face into the interior of the platform, leaving an open area in the center. Although the relative sizes of the three structures vary, there is usually a large building in the middle flanked by two smaller ones on both sides. In almost all instances there is a stairway leading to the center of the platform level.

Another type of triadic grouping not included in this definition is the in-line arrangement of buildings, such as Group E at Uaxactún (Figure 4.3). These structures are a distinct type of triadic grouping that served a very specific function: they were used as points for determining solstices and equinoxes. In other words, the three buildings constitute a series of visual references to observe the sunset on the horizon (Heyden and Gendrop 1973:95).

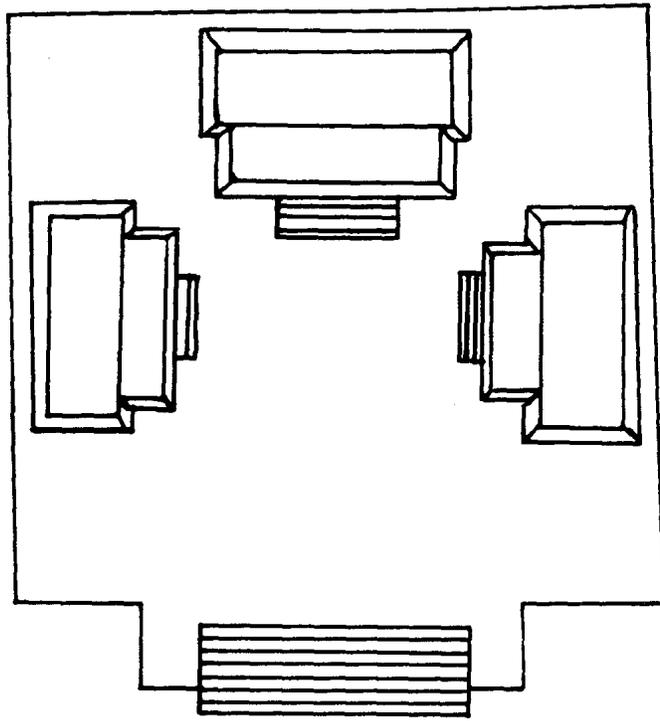


Figure 4.1. The idealized triadic grouping.

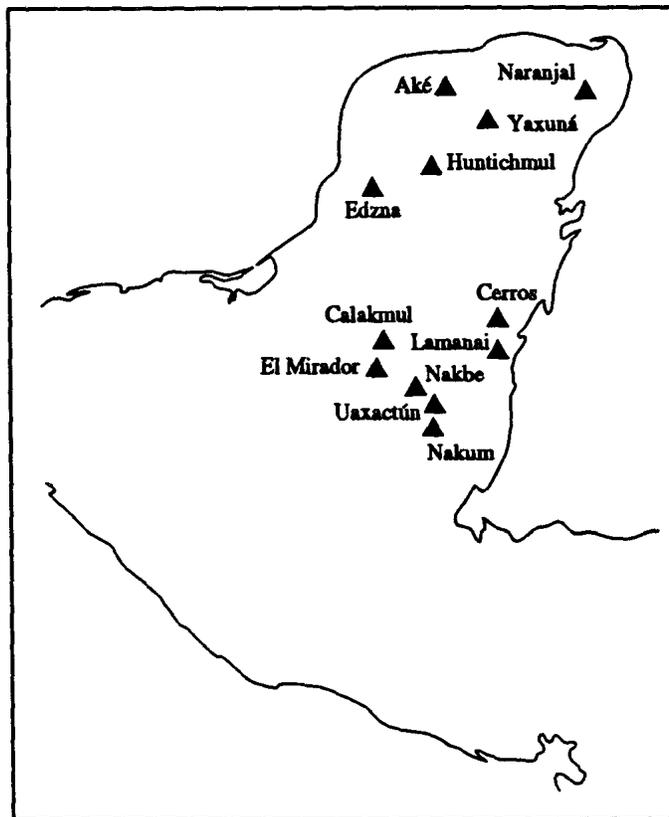


Figure 4.2. The location of Naranjal and other sites with triadic groupings in the Maya Lowlands.

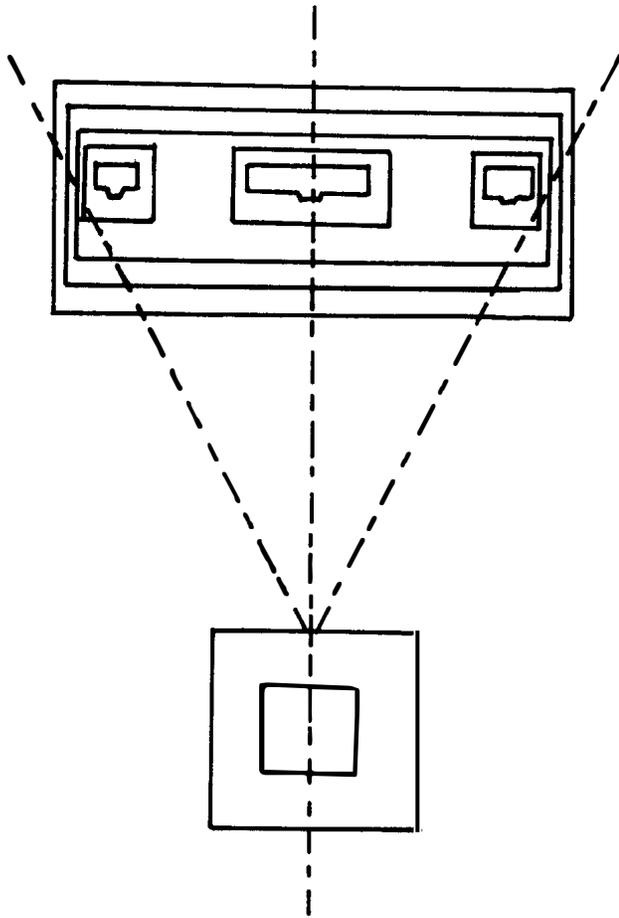


Figure 4.3. The linear triad, Group E at Uaxactún (adapted from Ricketson and Ricketson 1937:48).

NARANJAL AND THE BOX NI GROUP

On the southern end of the site of Naranjal, 1.5 km from the central plaza, is a complex known as the Box Ni group (Figure 4.4). The overall similarities of the architectural style, and the close proximity of this grouping to the rest of the site, define it as part of Naranjal. The Box Ni group consists of a raised, rectangular basal platform with three major structures. The supporting basal platform measures approximately 1 m to 1.5 m high and is made of massive, roughly dressed stones.

A central stairway leads to the platform level supporting three major building platforms identified as Structures A, D, and E. On the west end of the platform is Structure A, an apsidal building platform with large, well-dressed stones and an intact apron corbel wall. The central building, known as Structure D, is a rectangular structure with large,

well-dressed stones. There is a broad, well-preserved stairway that runs along the front of this structure. At the top of this stairway is a platform with a possible asymmetrical stairway on the west side of it. The top of the structure is collapsed, with no preserved evidence of a superstructure. On the eastern end of the platform is Structure E, a poorly preserved, T-shaped structure. On the frontal side of the building there is a narrow stairway that was probably added during the Late Postclassic. On top of the building is a level area with evidence of a rectangular structure.

Surrounding these structures are five much smaller and poorly preserved platforms. Structure H is a rectangular structure that was built onto a natural bedrock outcrop. The other four constructions, Structures B, C, F, and G, are poorly preserved round platforms with uncut stones. The difference in the masonry and the general construction of these smaller buildings suggest that they were added after the three main structures were complete.

TRIADIC GROUPINGS ELSEWHERE IN THE MAYA LOWLANDS

Triadic groupings similar to the Box Ni group can be seen at other sites in the northern and southern lowlands. A comparison of these sites to the Box Ni group may shed light on the reasons behind this triadic pattern.

Northern Lowlands

Aké. The Early Classic site of Aké is located in the state of Yucatán, fairly close to the modern city of Mérida. Currently, the platform of Structure 14 has a modern church on it, but it originally consisted of a raised platform with a triadic grouping (Figure 4.5). The platform supports a large central structure with a small temple on top and two smaller temples on the sides (Roys and Shook 1966:30). The overall architecture is very similar to Naranjal and includes such traits as rounded corners, apron moldings, and blocks of large, well-dressed stone.

Yaxuná. The site of Yaxuná is located in the state of Yucatán, just south of the site of Chichén Itzá. The northern group consists of a raised rectangular platform, with three pyramids in a triangular formation. According to David Freidel, they appear to have been built during the Late Preclassic; however, they were refurbished during the Terminal Classic period (Freidel 1986:7). On one of the structures there are well-dressed, megalithic blocks of stone; although, it is not yet clear if they were taken from somewhere else at the site to refurbish the

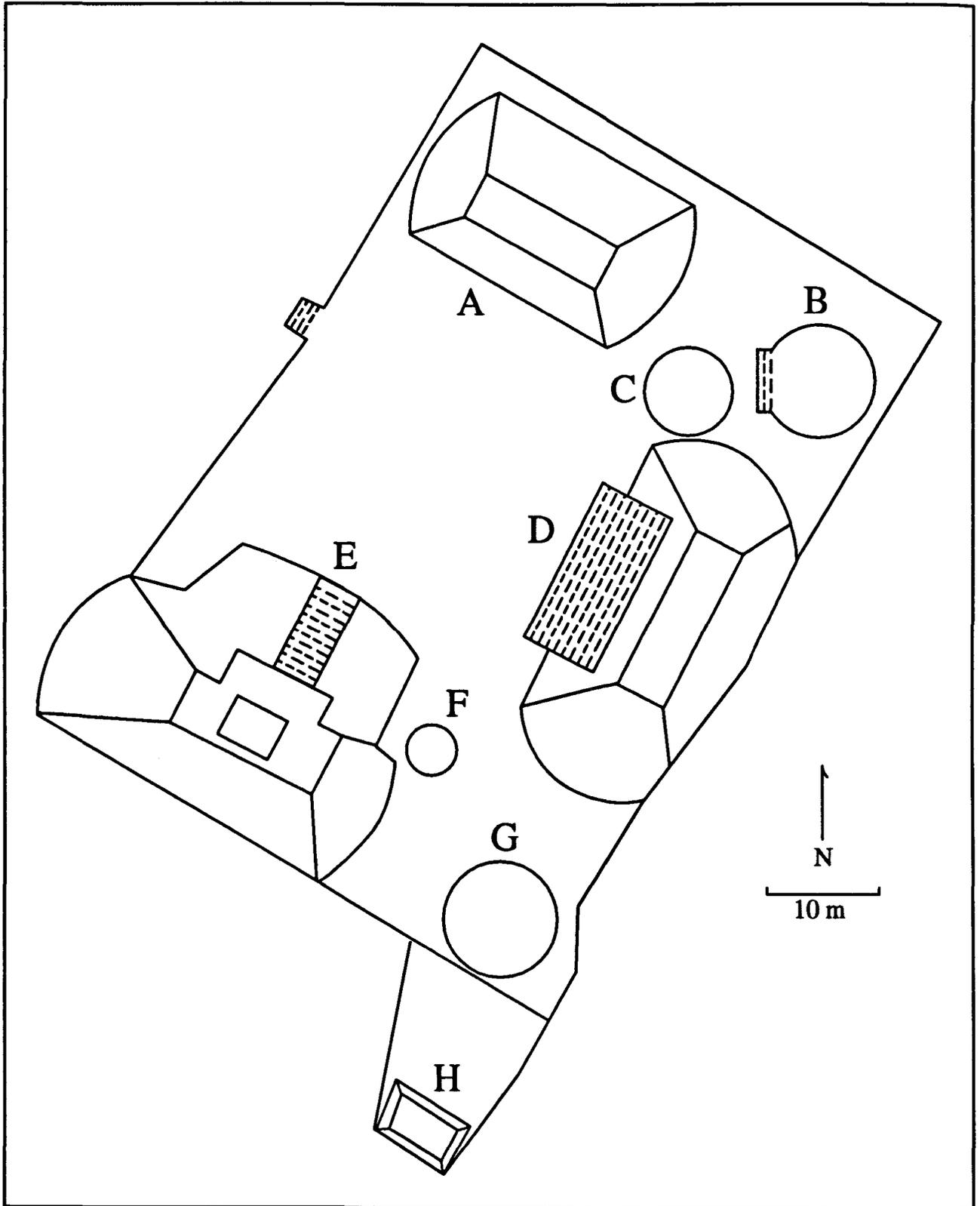


Figure 4.4. The Box Ni group at Naranjal.

Southern Lowlands

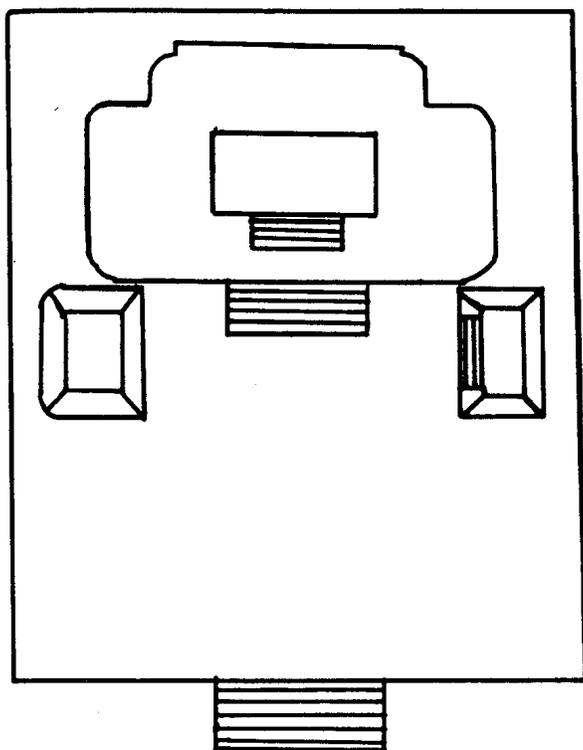


Figure 4.5. Structure 14 at Aké, Yucatán (adapted from Roys and Shook 1966:30).

structure during the Terminal Classic. The triadic grouping known as the South Group also has a raised rectangular platform supporting three pyramids in a triangular arrangement. According to Freidel, these structures were refurbished in the Terminal Classic period as well (Freidel 1986:8).

Huntichmul. Huntichmul is located in the state of Campeche and is approximately 10 km south of Labná. In Group B, a *sacbe* of about 60 m connects two triadic complexes. The southern complex has a raised platform that supports three structures in a triangular formation. Structure 9 of this triad clearly has masonry of the megalithic style. The northern platform also supports three structures, including Structure 13, an 8-m-high pyramid (Dunning 1992:231).

Edzna. The site of Edzna is also located in the state of Campeche and is southeast of Huntichmul. The major structures were constructed during the Late Preclassic period. Complex 7 is the largest structure of the entire site and is another example of a triadic grouping. It consists of a raised rectangular platform that appears to have originally contained only three temples; however, more structures were built at a later time (Matheny et al. 1983:195).

Cerros. The site of Cerros, in northern Belize, has public architecture dating to the Late Preclassic period. Structure 4 is the largest building at the site and represents a triadic grouping (Figure 4.6). There is a rectangular raised platform that supports three structures including a large central pyramid and two much smaller structures, with a central stairway leading to the platform level (Robinson and Freidel 1986:1).

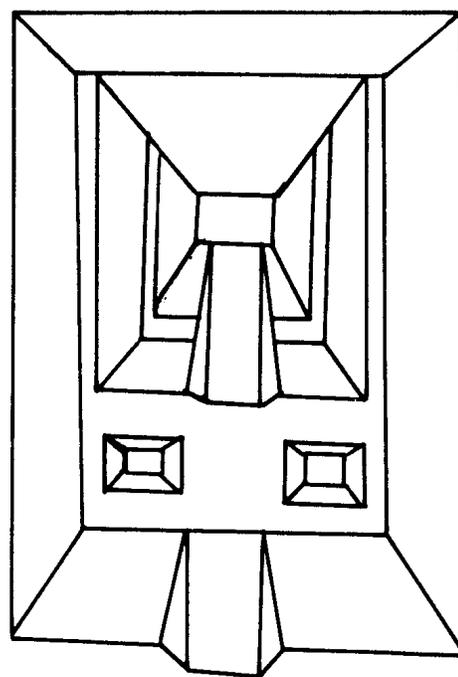


Figure 4.6. Structure 4 at Cerros, Belize (adapted from Robinson and Freidel 1986:map of Cerros).

Lamanai. The site of Lamanai is also located in northern Belize, just south of Cuello. Most of the construction dates to the Late Preclassic, including the triadic structure known as N10-43. It consists of a large basal platform which supports a second multi-terraced platform with three sets of stairs. At the top of the three stairways are three structures: a large central building flanked by two smaller structures which face inward on the east and west sides (Pendergast 1981:41).

El Mirador. El Mirador, in northern Guatemala, has several triadic groupings dating to the Late Preclassic period (Matheny 1986:15). One of the most impressive triadic structures is known as the

Tigre Complex. The first level of the main structure is located about 30 m above the complex plaza level, and includes a triad of structures: a large pyramid flanked by two smaller structures in a triangular formation. A stairway leads from the platform level to the center pyramid of the grouping (Matheny 1986:16-17).

Nakbe. Just south of the border of Campeche and 13 km southeast of El Mirador is the Preclassic site of Nakbe. In the Western group at the site is a triadic grouping known as Structure 27. It is a 25-m-high pyramid with a very steep slope of 70 percent. There is a large central structure with two very small (approximately .40-m) side structures that may have originally been built out of perishable materials. A foundation with large blocks of stone suggests a megalithic construction (Hansen 1992:106-107).

Uaxactún. At the site of Uaxactún, a triadic grouping known as the South Mound dates to the Late Preclassic (Figure 4.7). The raised platform is T-shaped with rounded corners on the front and supports three temples, all with their own platforms and stairways (Ricketson 1937:44). The masonry of the South Mound consists of well-dressed megalithic stones (Ricketson 1937:66).

In its initial stage during the Early Classic, Structure A-V, also of Uaxactún, was a triadic grouping (Proskouriakoff 1963:115; Smith 1957:15). This structure has a raised, square platform with three vaulted structures of roughly the same size in a triangular formation (Figure 4.8). A central stairway leads to the platform level.

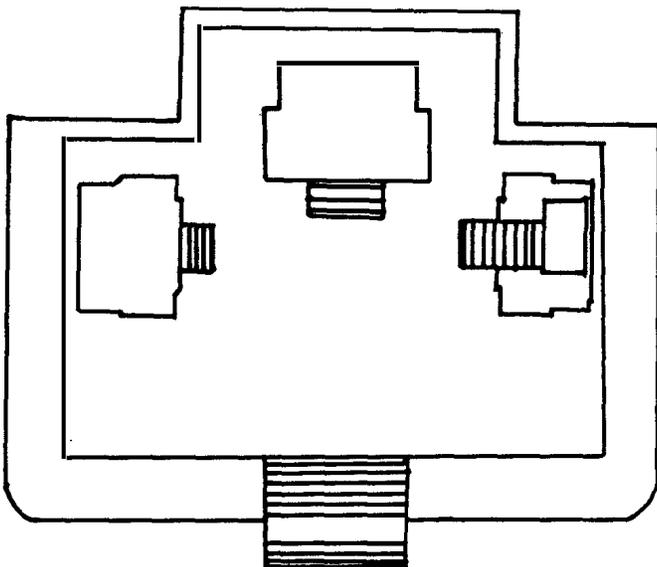


Figure 4.7. South Mound at Uaxactun, Guatemala (adapted from Ricketson and Ricketson 1937:60).

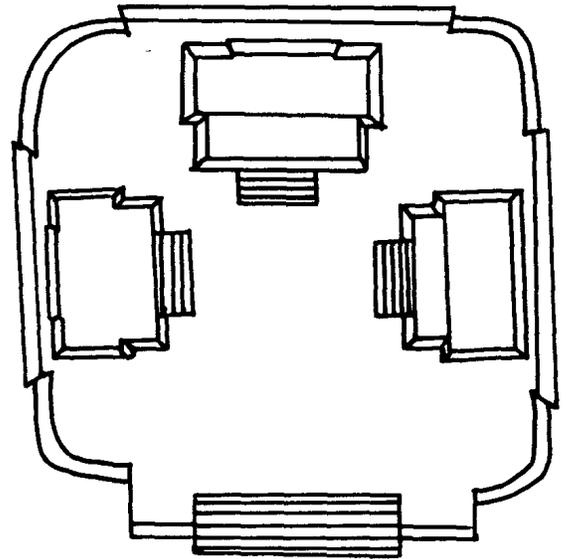


Figure 4.8. Structure A-V at Uaxactun, Guatemala (adapted from Smith 1957:Figure 60).

Nakum. Nakum, located east of Tikal in northern Guatemala, exhibits another triadic group. Court V is a T-shaped structure with three structures on top (Figure 4.9). The largest structure, known as Temple N, is located in the middle and is flanked by two smaller buildings. Three stairways lead to the level of the platform, although two appear to be relatively useless since they are all on the same side of the platform. This suggests that the structure may have been reworked from an earlier period (Ricketson 1937:62).

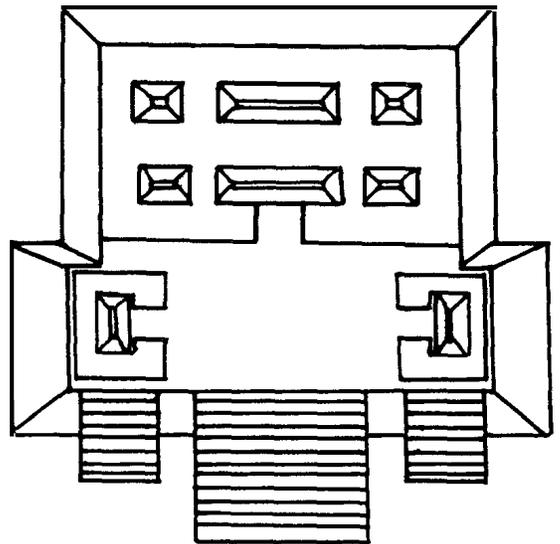


Figure 4.9. Court V at Nakum, Guatemala (adapted from Tozzer 1913:175).

Calakmul. Calakmul has a clear example of an Early Classic triadic grouping known as Structure 7. It is a raised, T-shaped platform with three structures in a triangular formation. In this case, there is a larger structure in the middle, flanked by two smaller structures to the sides. A stairway in front of the central building leads to the plaza level. The masonry of this complex has been described as consisting of large blocks of stone with rounded corners (Ruppert and Denison 1943:20).

EMERGING PATTERNS

After looking at the distribution of the triadic groupings in the northern and southern lowlands, two patterns emerge. The first is that all of the triadic groupings at the above mentioned sites have been identified as being built during the Late Preclassic or Early Classic periods, indicating that this grouping was established at an early time in the Maya Lowlands. This is consistent with the findings by Richard Hansen for the northern Petén: "The consistency of the triadic architectural arrangement and the wide distribution of the structures throughout early sites has been associated with Preclassic cultural remains and appears to be a diagnostic marker with a generally restricted chronological range, although some examples extend into the Early Classic" (Hansen 1992:54). Nonetheless, while this pattern seems to have been established during the Late Preclassic/Early Classic periods, it certainly does not necessarily mean that all triadic groupings will be from this time period.

The second pattern to surface is that these triadic groupings are often associated with megalithic stonework. As mentioned earlier in this paper, the sites of Naranjal, Huntichmul, Aké, Calakmul, Nakbe, Uaxactún, and possibly Yaxuná have all been reported to have large blocks of well-dressed stone, which may represent the megalithic style. If so, these coinciding patterns may support the early dating of the megalithic style and help define a style of architecture for these lowland areas.

WHY TRIADIC GROUPINGS?

It is possible that the configuration of the triadic grouping is simply based on a desire for symmetry. Henri Stierlin has noted that this perceived necessity for balance in the artificial landscape can be found in all ancient civilizations, and is derived from what we see in the natural world (1976:174). However, this explanation seems incomplete since

much of the Maya architecture is thought to have political, religious or ceremonial significance, and according to Ray Matheny, the triadic grouping reflects complex religious or sociopolitical themes (1986:23-24).

Richard Hansen has suggested that the triadic grouping has an ideological basis. "The depiction of the triadic form and its association with primary deity figures found throughout the Lowlands on similar constructions, suggest that the impetus for the construction was an ideological concept that stimulated a growing population and its associated administrative governments to respond with huge construction campaigns" (Hansen 1992:167). He suggested that the large size of many of the triadic groupings indicates that an enormous labor force was coerced through a combination of administrative and ideological or religious themes (Hansen 1992:167). However, mobilization of labor would have been on a more meager scale at some of the smaller sites such as Naranjal.

Similarly, Hansen has suggested that the mythological basis for the triadic pattern may be a triad of gods, such as the triad found at the Cross group at Palenque (Hansen 1992:168). Interestingly, David Stuart has found epigraphic evidence that there are triads of gods at Caracol and other sites, and that those triads are different from the one found at Palenque (Karl Taube, personal communication 1994). This may indicate that triadic groupings of gods were a common configuration, perhaps providing a basis for the wide-spread pattern of triadic groupings.

David Freidel and Linda Schele (1993) have presented another explanation for the triadic complex. They suggested that when the Maya built their cities, they reproduced the sacred landscape of creation. For example, in Maya mythology, the gods planted the three heavenly hearth stones, lifted the sky, and then created the lakes, mountains, and forests. Freidel and Schele suggested that the triadic groupings at Uaxactún mimic the three sacred hearth stones, and that these structures were the areas for dance ceremonies that enabled people to voyage to the otherworld (Freidel et al. 1993:140,143).

It is possible that triadic groupings in general were used for dances and other ceremonies. These types of performances often require a designated area separate from its surroundings. One way to make this separation is with physical boundaries. Two factors in the construction of the triadic groupings may indicate that they were built with the intention of defining a restricted space. First, the arrangement of the buildings in a triangular formation clearly defines a central court area. Second, the court is visually in-

accessible from a lower level because it is on a raised platform.

To support this idea of bounded areas in architecture, an interesting comparison can be made with the site of Teotihuacan. Although there are more than 23 triadic complexes at Teotihuacan, they are not on raised platforms. Esther Pasztory (1988) has suggested that these three-temple complexes were intended to be approachable. They were located in residential or other areas that were easily accessible to the average person. In contrast, one of the triadic groupings, and other structures such as the Ciudadela, had a sunken court-area surrounded by raised walls (Pasztory 1988:54-55). Clearly, the walls were used to define the area inside and to limit the view into it. This comparison may suggest that while at Teotihuacan restricted space was defined by raised walls, in the Maya area, restricted space was defined by raised platforms. If in fact raised platforms with triadic groupings represent an area of restricted space, it may well indicate that they were being used for dances and other ceremonies that were not intended for public viewing.

The distribution of the triadic grouping in the Maya Lowlands can be traced through space and time. The trait appears throughout the northern and southern lowlands and seems to have been established

early, most likely in the Late Preclassic or Early Classic period. Similarly, it is often associated with large blocks of stone and perhaps the megalithic style. This combination of traits at many sites helps define an architectural style for the lowlands region during the Late Preclassic and Early Classic periods. The triadic layout may reflect a wide-spread association with religious or other ideology. The groupings may also represent an area of restricted space used for dances or other ceremonies. In conclusion, triadic groupings found at early sites such as Naranjal are an intriguing pattern and merit further investigation.

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