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TERMINAL CLASSIC CIRCULAR ARCHITECTURE IN THE SIBUN VALLEY, BELIZE

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Abstract

Terminal Classic circular architecture has been characterized as a "non-Classic" trait stemming from Chontal-Itza groups from the Gulf lowlands who developed a long-distance, circum-peninsular trade route and established their capital city at Chichen Itza in northern Yucatan. Recent investigations of a series of circular shrines proximate to the Caribbean coast in Belize have yielded ceramics and radiocarbon dates that link these buildings to the ninth century, coeval with the early Sotuta phase at Chichen Itza (A.D. 830–900). We present an architectural comparison of circular shrines and map out a network of sites that cluster along the rivers and coast of Belize. We consider two possibilities that may not be mutually exclusive: (1) local elite emulation of northern styles following pilgrimage to Chichen Itza for political accession ceremonies, and, (2) trading diasporas involving small-scale migration of Chontal-Itza merchants along the eastern Caribbean coast.

The Terminal Classic period—the transition from the Classic to Postclassic from around A.D. 780 to 900—marks an important period of political, economic, and social transformation throughout Mesoamerica (Demarest et al. 2004; Diehl and Berlo 1989).[1] During this transitional period, the political influence of Maya cities in the Peten core area was declining as large centers in northern Yucatan, like Chichen Itza, rose to power (Figure 1). The recently revised chronology for the northern Maya lowlands suggests that the northern polity of Chichen Itza dates to between A.D. 800–1050, overlapping with other Terminal Classic and Early Postclassic Maya sites elsewhere in the lowlands (Andrews et al. 2003; Milbrath and Peraza Lope 2009; Peraza Lope et al. 2006; Ringle et al. 1998). At Chichen Itza, the circular building known as the Caracol shrine is the largest and most famous example of circular architecture in the Maya area (Pollock 1936a; Ruppert 1935). Other smaller-scale examples of circular architecture have been found along the eastern Caribbean watershed in Belize at the sites of Caye Coco, Cerros, Nohmul, Blue Creek, San Juan (on Ambergris Caye), as well as at other sites in the mid-to-lower Belize and Sibun River valleys—some 400 km to the south of Chichen Itza (see Figure 1) (Chase and Chase 1982, 2004; Guderjan et al. 2007, 2009; Guderjan and Garber 1995; Harrison-Buck 2007, 2011, 2012, 2013; Helmke 2006; Kowalski et al. 1994:8; Rosenswig and Masson 2002).

For years, scholars interpreted round structures as Postclassic period architecture that resulted from a Toltec invasion of Chichen Itza (Tozzer 1957). This theory has been reassessed as more examples of circular architecture dating to the Terminal Classic period (rather than the Postclassic) have been found. Kowalski and colleagues (1994:7–8) suggest that rather than the Toltecs of central Mexico, "the idea [of] the round structure form was disseminated by the Itza," a branch of Chontal-speaking Maya people who appear to have their origins in the Gulf lowlands (Scholes and Roys 1968:23–24). Based on his study of ethnohistoric accounts, Thompson (1970) suggested his now famous "Putun-Itza" hypothesis, arguing that Chontal-speaking Putun Maya groups invaded Chichen Itza in A.D. 918. While most scholars now find Thompson's chronology for Chichen Itza untenable, they generally accept his suggestion that an outward movement of Chontal-speaking "Mexicanized" Maya merchants from the Gulf Coast introduced a series of "non-Classic" traits in the southern Maya lowlands during the ninth century (Kristan-Graham and Kowalski 2007:35). In evaluating Thompson's (1970) argument, Kowalski (1989:173–177) and others (see, for example, Sabloff and Willey 1967; Vargas 1997, 2001) have suggested that Chontal-Itza factions established themselves at Chichen Itza and developed a long-distance, circum-peninsular trade network that stretched from the Gulf Coast around the Yucatan, running along the east coast of Belize as far south as the Bay of Honduras and into the Guatemalan highlands.

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[1] The start and end dates for the Terminal Classic period vary depending on the location in question. At some sites, the Terminal Classic period begins within the eighth century and at others it extends into the eleventh century (see Rice and Forsyth 2004:Tables 3.3c and 3.3d). In the Puuc Hills and Northern Plains, the culture history of the Puuc and Puuc-related architectural styles are traditionally dated to the Late and Terminal Classic periods (approximately A.D. 750–900/950) and the Early Postclassic period begins after A.D. 900/950 (Andrews and Sabloff 1986:434). At Chichen Itza, Cobos (2004, 2007) notes that the Sotuta Complex has an early phase dating to the ninth century, which can be distinguished from a late Sotuta phase dating roughly A.D. 900–1050. Both Sotuta phases contain Chichen Red Wares and Chichen Slate Wares, but Thin Slate is absent in the later phase and new ceramic forms and trade wares, such as Tohil Plumbate, are introduced at this time (Cobos 2007:330, 335). Cobos (2007) and others refer to both the early and late Sotuta phases at Chichen Itza as the Terminal Classic (see also Andrews et al. 2003). In this article, we define the period from A.D. 780/800–900 as the Terminal Classic period and the period from A.D. 900/950–1050 as the Early Postclassic period, which is in line with most southern Maya lowland chronologies.

Figure 1. Terminal Classic shrine sites in the Maya lowlands. Drawn by E. Harrison-Buck and digitized by M. Brouwer Burg.

The archaeological evidence cited in support of this long-distance trade network includes the widespread appearance of "non-Classic" Maya epigraphy, iconographic elements, fine paste ceramics, and new types of architecture, including circular shrines (Ball and Taschek 1989; Chase 1985; Kowalski 1989; Proskouriakoff 1950; Sabloff 1973, 1982; Sabloff and Willey 1967; Thompson 1970; Vargas 2001). Kowalski (1989) dated this regional interaction to the ninth century Terminal Classic (A.D. 790–909), based on the epigraphic data. Archaeological data from the Sibun Valley lends support to this chronology for the circular shrine architecture in Belize. Below the archaeological evidence is presented from three circular shrine structures that were partially excavated at three sites in the middle and lower reaches of the Sibun Valley—Pechtun Ha, Oshon, and Obispo (Figure 1). We compare these buildings along side other examples from the Maya lowlands, including structures to the north found at Chichen Itza, Uxmal, and Nohmul—three of the best documented examples in the published literature. While the construction techniques show local variation, the architectural layout and design of the buildings sharply parallel one another. We examine the chronological evidence, focusing on associated radiocarbon dates for the circular shrines. Finally, this study maps out the distributional patterns of similar circular architecture found in the eastern Maya lowlands, which appear to represent a network of sites along the eastern Caribbean, clustering along the rivers and coast of Belize (Figure 1). We conclude by discussing several possibilities that might explain the introduction of these "non-Classic" traits in Belize, which include trading diasporas involving small-scale migration of Chontal-Itza merchants and possibly pilgrimage whereby local elites visited important centers, like Chichen Itza, for political accession ceremonies and emulated these "foreign" styles when they returned home. These scenarios are not considered to be necessarily mutually exclusive of one another. On the contrary, we have suggested elsewhere (Harrison-Buck et al. 2013) that hybrid forms of material culture in the Sibun Valley—in this case architecture with a fusion of local and "foreign"

elements—reveal a process of transculturation that occurred at multiple scales of interaction (at both local and regional levels) and probably involved multiple variables, including local- and long-distance trade, small-scale migration, elite diplomatic ties, and *in situ* development.

THE SIBUN VALLEY

Positioned in the central part of Belize, the Sibun River valley is linked to the Peten area—and its many powerful Classic Maya centers, such as Tikal and Naranjo—via the Belize River, the proximate drainage immediately to the north. Both the Sibun and Belize Rivers bisect the country of Belize and drain into the inner channel of the Caribbean Sea, providing ready access via maritime transport to northern Yucatec capitals such as Chichen Itza. The extensive barrier reef that runs down the eastern Caribbean coast provided a protected route for those traveling by canoe up and down this inner channel. Both architecture and ceramic data suggest that the Belize inhabitants were interacting with both core areas in Peten and Yucatan during the Late-to-Terminal Classic transition (Harrison-Buck 2007; Harrison-Buck et al. 2007; McAnany et al. 2002). However, by Terminal Classic times (around A.D. 830–900) as many Maya centers in the Peten decline, the influence of Peten-affiliated traditions (otherwise referred to as the Tepeu and Spanish Lookout Spheres) weakens in the Sibun Valley and elsewhere in the eastern Maya lowlands (Rice and Forsyth 2004: 34–38, Figure 3.2). At sites in north-central Belize, such as Nohmul, Blue Creek, San Juan, and those in the mid-to-lower Sibun Valley, the introduction of circular architecture and other "non-Classic" traits, such as fine paste ceramics, points to an interaction with northern Yucatan and the Gulf lowlands and may signal Belize's growing participation in a new network of circum-peninsular trade that develops during this time.

As noted above, three examples of Terminal Classic circular architecture were found at three sites in the Sibun Valley—Oshon, Obispo, and Pechtun Ha (Figure 1). Each of the three structures were partially exposed in excavations conducted by the first author from 1999–2003 as part of the Xibun Archaeological Research Project (XARP), directed by McAnany. In addition, test pitting and limited exposure of some of the neighboring elite residential structures in the plaza groups at Oshon, Obispo, and Pechtun Ha were carried out by XARP at this time. The three sites with circular structures are modest in size. Although Oshon (Figure 2) is the second largest site in the Sibun Valley and contains what might be considered a public ceremonial plaza in Group B, the site is relatively small. Ben Thomas (2005:159, Table 5.2) characterizes Oshon as a "major regional center" for the Sibun Valley, but when compared to other sites in the Maya lowlands he notes that the site would probably be classified as "a minor regional center" (Bullard 1960; Hammond 1975). In all cases, the circular architecture appears well integrated into the original site plans and suggests that these structures were part of a long-term cultural establishment in the settlement history in the Sibun Valley. The similarities in site planning, architectural design, and building practice among all three structures in the Sibun suggest a prolonged and widely shared tradition involving shrine architecture. Similarities shared with other examples of circular architecture, such as those discussed below, point to a broader connection with other lowland Maya sites including Nohmul, Uxmal, and Chichen Itza. Local construction techniques and other distinguishing elements, however, suggest that

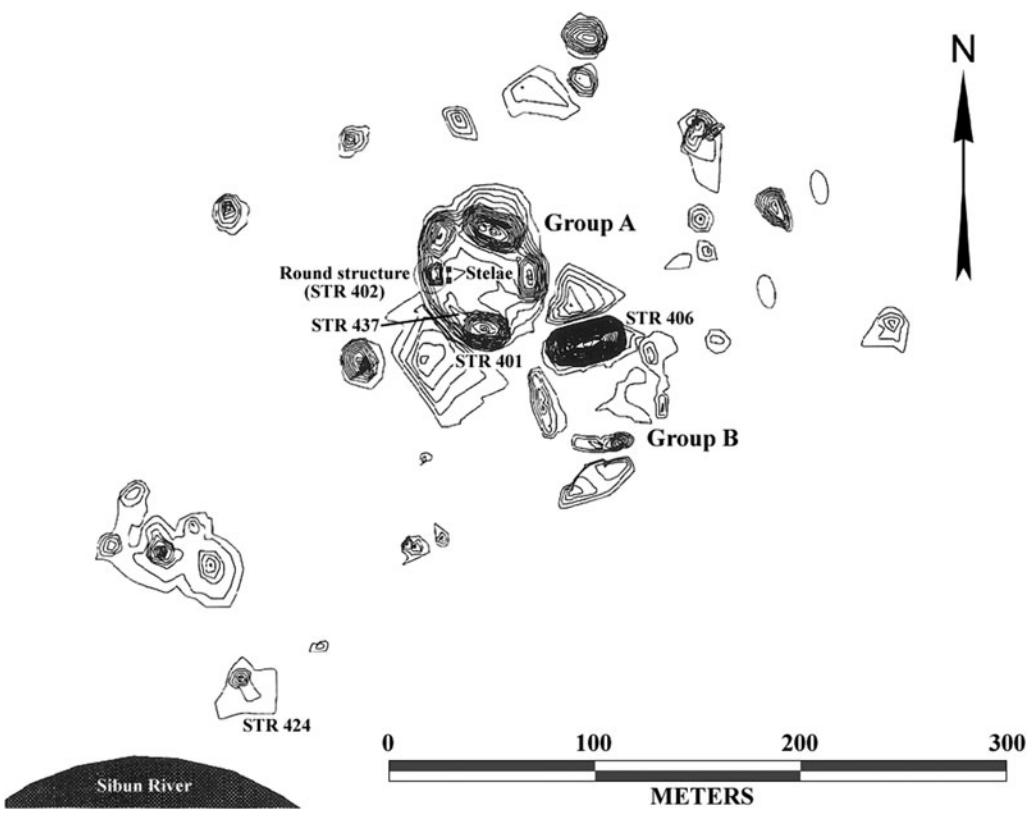

Figure 2. Map of the Oshon Site in the Sibun Valley. Drawn by B. Thomas.

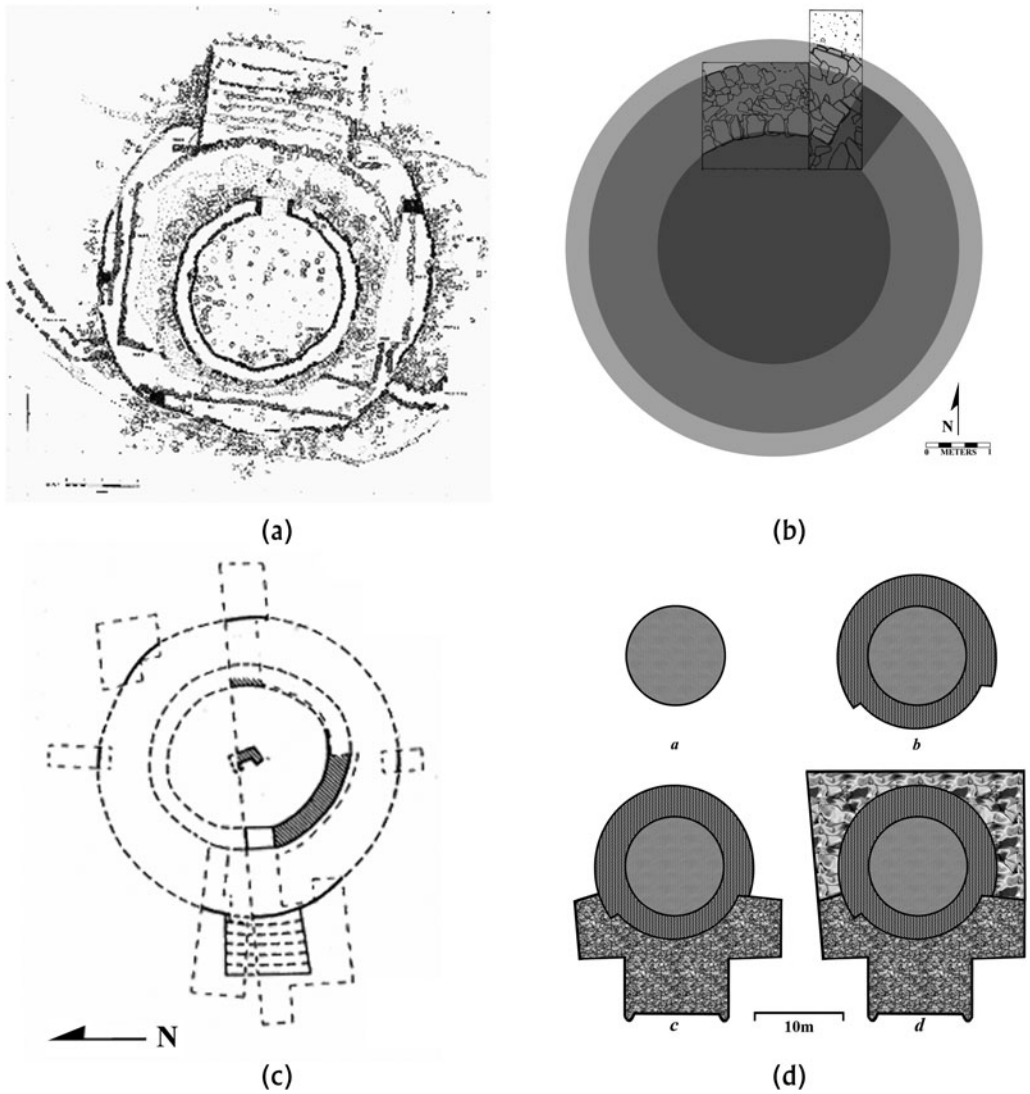

Figure 3. Lowland Maya circular architecture: (a) the round structure at Uxmal (Kowalski et al. 1996:Figure 3); (b) Structure 100 at Pechtun Ha (drawing by E. Harrison-Buck); (c) Structure 9 at Nohmul (Chase and Chase 1982:Figure 2); (d) the Caracol at Chichen Itza (redrawn from Pollock 1936a:Figure 31).

the Sibun shrines are a hybrid blend of local and "foreign" styles (Harrison-Buck 2012; Harrison-Buck et al. 2013).

CIRCULAR ARCHITECTURE IN THE MAYA LOWLANDS

Round structures have a wide geographic distribution in Mesoamerica, extending as far as Oaxaca and central Mexico (Finsten et al. 1996; Pollock 1936a:1–2; Rosenswig and Masson 2002:216–217) and have been documented in Belize as early as the Middle Formative period, between 900–500 B.C. (Aimers et al. 2000). Formative period round structures are fairly common in the Maya area (Aimers et al. 2000; Haberland 1958; Hammond et al. 1991; Ricketson and Ricketson 1937:115; Sidrys and Andresen 1978), although the shape and size vary considerably, ranging from 3–10.9 m in diameter (see Aimers et al. 2000: Table 1). These early constructions are substantially different from the later period circular architecture. The simple platform structures of the Formative period tend to have exterior retaining walls that are vertical or taper in slightly from the base, and usually consist of uncut or roughly cut rectangular limestone blocks, set in mortar and covered with a thick layer of plaster with a well-smoothed surface (Aimers et al. 2000: Figures 4, 5, and 7; Haberland 1958: Figure 2; Sidrys and Andresen 1978:642–643, Figure 5). These early round platforms have been variously interpreted as dwellings, astronomical observatories, altars, sweat baths, and places of ritual performance associated with ancestral veneration (Aimers et al. 2000:71).

Later versions of circular architecture, corresponding to the Terminal Classic and Postclassic periods (A.D. 800–1450), are quite distinct in both form and function from the Formative period round structures. Circular shrines from the Terminal Classic period are found at sites across a broad area of the Maya lowlands (Figure 1), from Chichen Itza (Pollock 1936a and 1936b; Ruppert 1935) and Uxmal (Kowalski et al. 1994) in northern Yucatan to Seibal in southern Peten, Guatemala (Smith 1982), to Nohmul (Chase and Chase 1982) and San Juan (Guderjan and Garber 1995) in the eastern lowlands of Belize. Other examples of Terminal Classic circular shrines are found at Chontal sites in

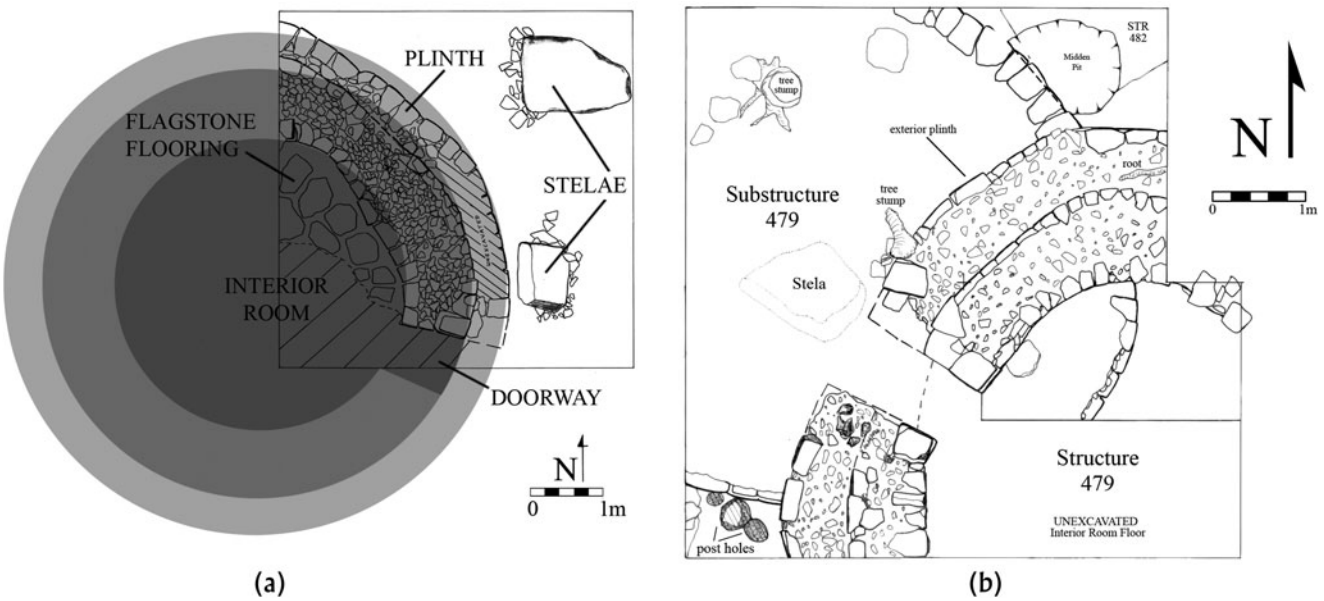

Figure 4. (a) Plan view of the circular structure at Oshon, Sibun Valley. (b) Plan view of the two superimposed circular structures at Obispo, Sibun Valley. Drawings by Eleanor Harrison-Buck.

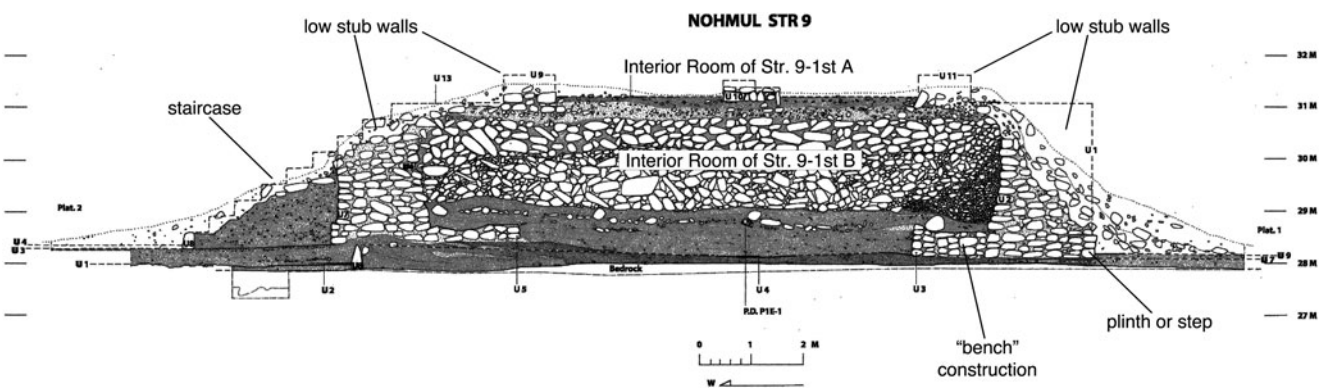

Figure 5. Cross-section of Structure 9 at Nohmul (adapted from Chase 1982a:Figure 3-10).

the Gulf lowlands, such as El Paraiso and El Tigre or Itzamkanac, the Acalan Putun capital at the time of the Spanish Conquest (Fox 1987:60, 83; Thompson 1970:17; Vargas 2001).

Architectural Comparisons

Architecturally, the three circular buildings found at the sites of Pechtun Ha, Oshon, and Obispo in the Sibun Valley are very similar to one another and also share similarities with other Terminal Classic circular structures found in the Maya lowlands, including those from Nohmul, Uxmal, and Chichen Itza (Figure 3). The construction of a superstructure comprising low stone walls characterizes the circular architecture in the Sibun Valley, as well as at Nohmul, Uxmal, and possibly the early phases of the Caracol at Chichen Itza. Excavation reports from Nohmul and Uxmal do not note any evidence of additional wall or vault stones in the collapse debris of the circular shrines, suggesting that the low superstructure walls were topped with a perishable structure and conical roof (rather than a vaulted stone roof like the final phase of the Caracol[2]). This construction style, consisting of low stub walls topped with a perishable superstructure also characterizes the three circular shrines found in the Sibun Valley (Figures 3b and 4a, b). All of these buildings (including the examples from Nohmul, Uxmal, and Chichen Itza) contain an interior room, the dimensions of which range from 5 to 12 m. Most contain a single narrow doorway measuring between 1–1.5 m wide (see Figures 3 and 4). The outer dimensions of circular architecture, which usually consists of a round substructure, are

[2] A similar layout may have existed on earlier phases of the Caracol, but were obscured by the final construction phase. Ruppert (1935:272) acknowledges the possibility that some form of masonry superstructure may have existed when the earlier circular platform of Structure 1st C was constructed (see Figure 3d). A 12.19-meter gap in the plinth that surrounds the base of Structure 3C15-1st C suggests it may once have had a central staircase leading up to the top of the circular platform. The western doorway of the final phase of the masonry superstructure (Structure 3C15-1st A) aligns with this gap, supporting the idea that some form of masonry superstructure was in place during this earlier phase.

more variable in size and format.[3] The range of substructure size appears relatively proportionate to site size and the degree of architectural elaboration may be contingent on the site's elite prestige. Other shared features that frequently occur include masonry walls with an overhanging cornice, a low circular plinth surrounding the footing walls, and the presence of paving stones sometimes lining the interior floors of the room (Figure 4a). These architectural features are not common in the southern Maya lowlands, but are construction techniques often found in the Puuc and Northern Plains region of Yucatan.

As part of the first author's dissertation research, Harrison-Buck (2007) conducted a thorough comparative investigation of circular architecture and defined three discrete building types (Types 1–3) for Terminal Classic circular architecture in the Maya lowlands. Simple circular platforms characterize Type 1 structures. In the Sibun Valley, only the Obispo site revealed a Type 1 platform (Substructure 479), which represents the earliest phase of circular architecture in the valley (Figure 4b). Other Type 1 circular architecture is found at Caye Coco (Structure 1) and San Juan (Structure 3B) in northern Belize (Guderjan and Garber 1995; Rosenswig and Masson 2002:Figure 4), Becan (Structure 16) in Campeche, Mexico, and possibly at Nakum (Structure 12) in Peten, Guatemala (Źrałka 2008:42; Źrałka and Hermes 2012; see Figure 1 for site locations). In addition, the earliest phase of the Caracol building (Structure 3C15-2nd) at Chichen Itza would be characterized as a Type 1 structure. This building phase may or may not have had a staircase leading to the top of the circular platform. In his excavation report of the Caracol, Ruppert (1935:86) noted that the moldings and cornice completely encircled the earliest circular platform and that he found no evidence of a staircase. He indicated that it was possible there once existed a perishable wooden staircase leading to the top, but admitted finding no firm evidence for this (Ruppert 1935:87). In the Sibun Valley, the Type 1 platform at Obispo consists of a rough, cobble-filled surface and does not appear to have been formally topped with a paved plaster surface. This also was the case at Chichen Itza and is one reason why Ruppert (1935:271) speculated that the first two phases of the Caracol—both 3.7 m-high solid platforms—possibly were never completed or used prior to the final building phase (Figure 3d). However, despite the top surface looking incomplete, the exterior walls of the two earlier circular substructures of the Caracol appear to have been nicely finished with plaster (Ruppert 1935:Figures 96, 103–104, 119).

A superstructure with low stub walls about three or four courses in height characterize the Type 2 circular structures (Harrison-Buck 2012:Figure 5). These buildings typically have a single, narrow doorway leading into an interior room. In most cases, a plinth that resembles a molding or low step surrounds the exterior. Unlike a basal platform, the plinth does not extend under the entire building and only underlies the superstructure walls (see Figure 5 cross-section for a clear example). In some cases the plaza surface serves as the floor of the interior room, but in other instances the interior floor is built up roughly to the height of the plinth, sometimes lined with flagstones. The Type 2 architecture has been found in the Sibun Valley at Oshon (Structure 402-1st B), Obispo (Structure 479-1st B), and Pechtun Ha (Structure 100-1st B), at Hum Chaak and Ik'nal in the Belize Valley, and at Blue Creek (Structure 22 in the Rosita Group) in northern Belize. This architecture type may also be present in the circular structure at Nohmul in northern Belize (labeled Structure 9-1st B in Figure 5).

Type 3 architecture marks the final construction phase of the Terminal Classic circular architecture in Belize (Harrison-Buck 2012:Figure 6). During this phase, the interior room of the Type 2 structure is infilled with large, loose cobble and boulders and transformed into a solid, round basal platform. In the case of the Caracol, it appears that a plinth or basal molding may have been added around the exterior base of the substructure at this time. In the Sibun Valley, set on top of this round substructure is another circular superstructure consisting of low stub walls as high as three courses. This building type is poorly preserved, but is found at Oshon (Structure 402-1st A), Obispo (Structure 479-1st A), and Pechtun Ha (Structure100-1st A). Other examples of Type 3 architecture—showing a circular superstructure positioned on a basal platform—are found in the final phases of the circular structures at both Uxmal and Nohmul (labeled Structure 9-1st A in Figure 5), and possibly the second phase of the Caracol (Structure 3C15-1st C) at Chichen Itza (Figure 3d). In some instances, stone used in the Type 3 superstructure appears to be recycled (taken from elsewhere at the site), perhaps indicating a decline in building practice during the final facet of the Terminal Classic period. In both Type 2 and Type 3 buildings, a perishable structure likely with a pointed thatch roof capped the low stub walls of the superstructure.

DATING THE CIRCULAR SHRINES

Associated archaeological evidence, specifically ceramics and radiocarbon assays that date discrete construction/occupational phases shed light on the chronology of these buildings. These data suggest that circular shrine architecture was introduced in the Belize area by at least the beginning part of the ninth century (A.D. 830–850) and appear to be abandoned by the early-to mid-tenth century. Radiocarbon dates associated with a series of construction phases for the circular structure at Obispo offer the clearest insight into the chronology of this building type found in the Sibun Valley. The plan view of the circular architecture at Obispo (Figure 4b) shows two distinct phases of the circular structure. The radiocarbon assays come from two carbon samples that were collected from these different architectural phases of the circular shrine at Obispo and suggest that the initial construction likely took place around the beginning part of the ninth century. The first charcoal sample was found in a midden-rich fill layer associated with the earliest structure (Substructure 479), a (Type 1) simple round platform, which resembles the initial phase of the Caracol at Chichen Itza (Structure 3C15-2nd). The charcoal sample yielded a 2-*sigma* calibrated date range of A.D. 758–887 (1,223 ± 35 ^{14}C age B.P.). The second charcoal sample came from the interior floor of the (Type 2) circular building that was constructed over top of the circular platform (Structure 479). This sample yielded a nearly identica. 2-*sigma* calibrated date range of A.D. 758–891 (1,231 ± 35 ^{14}C age B.P.). Both contexts contained a highly diagnostic Terminal Classic ceramic assemblage defined as the Ik'hubil Complex (Harrison-Buck 2007:Table 5.1). A final charcoal sample from Obispo that was radiocarbon dated was found associated with a thin scatter of terminal debris around the exterior of the circular structure, which contained Early Postclassic ceramic material (Harrison-Buck 2007:Table 5.2). It yielded a 2-*sigma* calibrated date range of A.D. 883–1018 (1,103 ± 35 ^{14}C age B.P.). These three dates firmly place the construction of circular architecture in the ninth century A.D.

[3] While the final phase of the Caracol substructure is square, an earlier phase (Structure 3C15-1st C) has a round substructure (see Figure 3d).

The construction and occupation of the circular structures in the Sibun Valley and elsewhere in Belize appear to be temporally coeval with the Caracol at Chichen Itza, dating between roughly A.D. 830–900. The primary occupation of the Caracol building (and most of the Monjas Complex) probably dates to the ninth century—a time period that is variably referred to as early Sotuta (Cobos 2004) or Cehpech (Pérez de Heredia 2010, 2012) at Chichen Itza. One dedicatory cache found on the north side of the basal platform supporting the Caracol building (Structure 3C15) contains two vessels that Pérez de Heredia (2012:Figure 17) identifies as either a Yabnal-Motul jar and a Cehpech bowl or a Motul jar and a Cehpech bowl, which dates the initial platform construction to around A.D. 830 (Pérez de Heredia 2012:393). The first phase of the Caracol—a simple circular platform (Structure 3C15-2nd)—was positioned on top of the square basal platform and another dedicatory cache was placed in a pit inside the fill of the circular platform. Pérez de Heredia (2012:393) notes that the jar found in the cache is identical to others found in burial cysts under the Three Lintels Platform, a Puuc-style structure that he dates to A.D. 630–700 or the middle facet of the Yabnal-Motul Complex (Pérez de Heredia 2012:388). Despite its early correlates, Pérez de Heredia (2012:393) dates the cache to the late facet of the Yabnal-Motul Complex or beginning of his Cehpech sequence (A.D. 830–850) based on its position in the construction sequence of the Caracol (see Brainerd 1958:Figures 68e and 99). There is at least one reliable hieroglyphic date associated with the final phase of the Caracol that dates to A.D. 885 (Ringle and Bey 2009:Table 1). In the collapsed tower of the final phase of the Caracol a Tohil Plumbate vessel—a highly diagnostic trade ware—was found, which suggests the final use and subsequent abandonment of the building was during the late Sotuta phase, at approximately A.D. 900–1050 (Milbrath and Peraza Lope 2003:23).

Similar deposits of Tohil Plumbate ceramics were found associated with the abandonment of the round structure at Uxmal (Kowalski et al. 1994:5–6). Kowalski and colleagues (1994:6) note that Cehpech ceramics are found in the construction fill of the round building, while the Plumbate offerings represent post-abandonment deposits. They conclude "that a considerable span of time elapsed between the abandonment of the Round Structure [at Uxmal] and the deposition of the Plumbate offerings" (Kowalski et al. 1994:6). Ringle and colleagues (1998:222) suggest that the "post-monumental" quality of the circular building and the presence of Plumbate ceramics points to possibly a tenth century date for the construction and use of this building at Uxmal. The discrete stratigraphic sequence of the Cehpech and Plumbate deposits, coupled with the building's similarities with other Terminal Classic round structures in the Maya lowlands, however, suggest that it may have been constructed earlier in the ninth century. During the Terminal Classic period (A.D. 770/800–950) Uxmal was the capital of a regional state in the Eastern Puuc region of northern Yucatan (Kowalski 2007:253). Scholars suggest that monumental construction ceased at Uxmal as early as A.D. 950 but that just prior to this the site witnessed its greatest boom in construction, including the House of the Governor, the Nunnery Quadrangle, and Ballcourt 1, all of which have associated carved monuments that date between A.D. 890–915 (Carmean et al. 2004:425, 431–432).

Like Uxmal, the site of Nohmul in northern Belize, located between the Rio Hondo and the New River, also contains a substantial Terminal Classic occupation (Chase 1982a, 1982b; Hammond 1983, 1985; Hammond et al. 1985). Structures 9 and 20, two Terminal Classic structures located in the East Plaza at Nohmul, are situated in front of earlier Classic period structures and appear as intrusive construction (Chase and Chase 1982:Figure 1). Structure 20, a so-called patio-quad structure with a sunken court area, is positioned at the base of Structures 18 and 19 and appears to be physically blocking the entrance to these two structures. Structure 9 (Figures 3c and 5) is a circular building and serves to further restrict access into an enclosed patio group in the East Plaza. Structures 9 and 20 contain Terminal Classic diagnostics, including Puuc and Thin Slate wares, and have been interpreted as Yucatec-style architecture emulative of Chichen Itza (Chase 1982a; Chase and Chase 1982). Recycled stones found associated with the northern-style structures, including a "cached" modeled stucco head, suggests that certain buildings associated with an earlier occupation at the site were demolished and perhaps "ritually" terminated. The evidence of architectural defacement and the intrusive nature and "foreign" style of Structures 9 and 20 at Nohmul suggests a significant shift in the political organization at Nohmul by Terminal Classic times. The evidence may indicate an invasion, as some have suggested, or that the Terminal Classic construction signifies a later re-occupation of an already abandoned site.

Diane Chase (1982a:122) states "although construction took place in a series of stages, Structure 9 does not seem to have been modified once built." But, examining the cross-section drawing of Structure 9 (Figure 5) and comparing it to others, such as the early phases of the Caracol Building at Chichen Itza and those from the Sibun Valley, we suggest at least two discrete construction phases may be present (Structures 9-1st A and 9-1st B), including what appears to be the resurfacing of the interior room floor of Structure 9-1st B (Harrison-Buck 2007:137). The Ikikik Ceramic Complex is associated with both phases of construction (Structures 9-1st A and 9-1st B) and suggests that they were both built during the ninth century Terminal Classic period (Chase 1982a).

DISCUSSION

Tracing out the presence and distribution of "non-Classic" Maya traits like circular architecture, scholars have proposed both western and eastern networks of interaction emanating from Chichen Itza (Ball 1974, 1986; Ball and Taschek 1989; Carmack 1981:45–47, Figure 3.7; Chase 1985; Florescano 2006; Kowalski 1989 and 2007). While it is debatable whether circular architecture disseminated in a linear fashion directly from Chichen Itza, there is a clear pattern of coastal and riverine distribution for circular shrines in Belize where numerous examples have been found (Figure 1). In addition to Nohmul (Chase and Chase 1982) and the site of San Juan in northern Belize (Guderjan and Garber 1995), more recently discovered examples come from Caye Coco (Rosenswig and Masson 2002), Cerros (Walker 1990:158–160, Figures 3.1 and 3.3c), Blue Creek (Guderjan et al. 2007, 2009), Pooks Hill (Helmke 2006), Hum Chaak, Ik'nal, and K'ak'nal in the eastern Belize Valley (Harrison-Buck 2011, 2013), as well as the three examples from the Sibun Valley discussed herein. To our knowledge, all of the circular architecture found in Belize is primarily associated with ninth century Terminal Classic ceramic assemblages, which reinforces the absolute chronology from radiocarbon dates presented here from the Sibun Valley. Farther afield in northern Yucatan, the ceramics associated with the construction phase of the circular structure at Uxmal and the initial construction phases of the Caracol at Chichen Itza that were reviewed above also point to a

ninth century date, although radiocarbon dates would help to solidify the northern chronology.

Circular shrine architecture found at Uxmal in northwest Yucatan and Nohmul in northern Belize have been linked with the expansion of Chichen Itza as a northern regional capital in Yucatan (Kowalski et al. 1994:8; Suhler et al. 2004:458). Yet, most argue that Chichen Itza's period of peak political and economic influence as a Yucatec center did not occur until the late Sotuta phase, between A.D. 900–1050 (Cobos 2004:532; Kristan-Graham and Kowalski 2007:48; Milbrath and Peraza 2009:581–582; Ringle et al. 2004:505). According to many of these scholars, it was during the late Sotuta phase (traditionally referred to as the "Mexican" or "Toltec" period) that hegemonic rule and economic expansion occurred across the peninsula. Yet, others argue against the idea of an "Itza" hegemony and, instead, suggest that Chichen Itza was one of a number of important *tollans* or regional capitals throughout Mesoamerica that shared a structure of political leadership and ritual centered on the Mexican feathered serpent god, Quetzalcoatl (Ringle 2004:168–169; see also Ringle et al. 1998).

Ringle and colleagues (1998:186) associate circular buildings with a so-called "cult of Quetzalcoatl" and the feathered serpent's wind aspect, Ehecatl. According to Taube (2001), the circular form of these buildings evokes the coiled body of the feathered serpent and Ehecatl's primary insignia—the spiraled conch shell. Harrison-Buck (2002) established a linkage between the feathered serpent and the Sibun Valley circular shrines, which she argues is expressed not only in the form of these buildings, but also in a high density of conch shell trumpets that she found in her excavations associated with the exterior of these buildings (for more recent discussion of some of these ideas see Harrison-Buck [2007, 2012] and McAnany [2007, 2012]). Ringle (2004:167, 183) has argued that the feathered serpent represents an "ideology of leadership" whereby client elites from other centers underwent rituals of investiture, received their implements of power, and were legitimized as local "feathered serpent" rulers at Chichen Itza and other *tollans*, such as Cholula and El Tajin. In such a case, the placement of a circular shrine within an elite residence might signify the coronation of a local leader as a feathered serpent ruler, whereby local leaders returned to their communities and built shrines to emulate northern styles. If circular shrine architecture is linked to this new form of leadership, it suggests that it was firmly in place by the ninth century and extended as far south as places like Belize.

Following Ringle and colleagues (1998:227), pilgrimage and legitimation rituals would have been crucially important for reinforcing economic linkages in the long-distance, circum-peninsular trade network. That these were connected concepts is reflected in Mayan terms, like the K'iche' word *b'inem*, which is "a journey, for the purpose of either trade or pilgrimage" (Tedlock 2010:14). Ethnohistoric documents support the idea of long-distance trade tied with elite pilgrimages to *tollans*, like Cholula and Chichen Itza, where legitimation rituals were performed and local elites were granted the right to govern their communities (Carmack 1981:45–47; Florescano 2006:130–134; Tedlock 1996:179). To illustrate this idea, Ringle (2004:169) cites the following passage by the sixteenth-century chronicler Gabriel de Rojas (1927 [1581]:161) regarding pilgrimage to Cholula at the time of contact:

> …kings or chiefs [from outside Cholula], in inheriting a kingdom or principality, would come to [the city of Cholula] to pay homage to the idol of this Quetzalcoatl, to whom they offered rich feathers, blankets, gold, and precious stones and other things of value, and having made offerings, they were put in a small room dedicated to this purpose in which the two highest priests marked them by piercing the ears, the nostrils, or the lower lip, depending on the kingdom, and they returned to their lands. And because of such things they were given credit and were respected by these lords. So that they might be respected by these lords, five *indios* from the priesthood also accompanied them home [Rojas 1927 (1581):161].

That five members from the priesthood would accompany the local elites home suggests that such interactions were not unidirectional. Ringle (2004:204) argues that such pilgrimages occurred as early as the ninth century based on the evidence of investiture rituals at Chichen Itza associated with the warrior leader K'ak'u Pakal. If so, these politco-religious diasporas may have contributed to the spread of "non-Classic" traits stemming from *tollans*, like Chichen Itza.

Similar small-scale population movements linked to religious pilgrimages and trading voyages are described elsewhere as "circular" migrations, involving "regular population movements with an intention to return" (Knapp 2008:49). Colonial accounts, such as those recorded by Alonso Ponce and others, lend further support to the idea of circular migrations, suggesting that in some cases communities along the eastern Caribbean with shrines were established by Chontal-Itza merchants, who built and maintained the shrines while overseeing their commercial affairs along the coast (Ciudad Real 1872:2:407–408; Lothrop 1924; Scholes and Roys 1968:34). Such descriptions resemble trading diasporas where "some portion of one culture's people—usually merchants—settled as immigrants among a foreign population" (Cusick 1998:4).

Migration as an explanatory process has a long-standing bias as an external model (Braswell 2003:15–18). "Continuing skepticism about using migration to explain cultural change…is clearly part of the processual legacy that rejects diffusionism and migration as hallmarks of cultural history" (Knapp 2008:51). As Susan Alt (2006:290) notes, previous models dealing with culture change often suffered from an all-or-nothing approach, proposing either local evolutionary development or wholesale population replacement as a result of colonization. Cohen (1971) points out that ancient, non-Western trading diasporas diverge from European models of colonialism—groups entering an area did not necessarily dominate their local host community. Although they may have intermarried with locals, "the foreigners seem to have maintained a distinct social identity for an extended period of time" (Stein 2002:28, citing Abner Cohen's [1971] "trading diaspora" model).

For the Maya area, a combination of local elite pilgrimage and circular migrations of Chontal-Itza merchant-priests who regularly traveled back and forth along the eastern Caribbean might explain the widespread appearance of circular shrines found distributed along the coast and rivers of Belize during the ninth century. Involvement of the local Sibun population is reflected in the hybridized construction techniques of circular architecture and may explain why shrines do not appear in every community occupied in the Sibun Valley during the Terminal Classic period (Harrison-Buck et al. 2013). If trading diasporas or circular migrations did occur in this area, small groups of Chontal-Itza may have entered places like the Sibun Valley and become permanent or semipermanent residents, but these individuals (perhaps serving as merchants and/or specially trained priests) would have retained strong ties with their homeland and perhaps ultimately

returned. This might explain why sites with circular shrine architecture are abandoned and "non-Classic" traits disappear rather abruptly in the early- to mid-tenth century in the Sibun Valley, yet small-scale local populations remain in the area during the subsequent Early Postclassic period.

CONCLUSIONS

In the Sibun Valley, the ceramic assemblages and associated radiocarbon assays from the circular shrines support a ninth century chronology for circular architecture, which appears to align with the ceramic chronology and the hieroglyphic record associated with the Caracol and other so-called "Old Chichen" structures at Chichen Itza dating to the early Sotuta phase, between A.D. 830–890 (Cobos 2007:326–327; Grube and Krochock 2007:214, 229). The traditional interpretation of circular architecture as a "Toltec" form of architecture introduced in the early tenth century at Chichen Itza is no longer tenable (Kowalski et al. 1994:8). The early phases of the Caracol building and other structures in the Monjas Complex reflect architectural features found in the Puuc region during the ninth century and may overlap in time with the circular building found at Uxmal, as well as those found elsewhere in the Maya lowlands, including Belize. The locations of sites with circular architecture appear to be positioned at strategic points along the coast and rivers of the Caribbean Watershed. The locations suggest an important connection between shrine architecture and the movement of goods and people, either on foot or via canoe, and may be tied to a circum-peninsular trade network developed by Chontal-Itza groups at this time, which continued in some areas through the Postclassic period. Cacao, honey and bird feathers—commodities highly sought after by the Chontal-Itza merchants according to ethnohistoric documents—were readily available in sub-tropical river valleys, like the Sibun, and may have been what stimulated an incursion into this part of the Maya lowlands during the ninth century. Future investigations will hopefully clarify the nature of this growing Terminal Classic political economy in terms of its the impact on the political and economic expansion of Chichen Itza, traditionally dated to the tenth century, and its potential relationship to the southern lowland "collapse" of Classic Maya aristocracy by the beginning the ninth century.

RESUMEN

La arquitectura circular del periodo clásico terminal ha sido descrita como un elemento "no-clásico", sino derivado de grupos del Chontal-Itza en el Golfo de México. Estos grupos habrían desarrollado una extensa red de comercio, probablemente controlada por Chichen Itza en el norte de la península Yucatan. En el valle del río Sibun, en la zona central de Belice, y en otros lugares de la cuenca Caribe, se construyeron estructuras circulares muy similares a versiones pequeñas del Caracol de Chichen Itza. En este estudio presentamos las evidencias arqueológicas recabadas en tres estructuras circulares excavadas en Sibun, a la vez que establecemos comparaciones con otras estructuras ubicadas en las zonas bajas del mundo maya, como Chichen Itza, Uxmal y Nohmul. Las estructuras circulares del periodo clásico terminal presentan una distribución consistente dentro de un área extensa de las zonas bajas maya, resaltando la existencia de un estilo de construcción específico. Las similitudes en la planificación de los sitios y su diseño arquitectónico, sugieren una prolongada tradición ampliamente compartida que incluía la construcción de altares circulares. Por otro lado, el uso de técnicas locales de construcción y de otros elementos distintivos, sugieren que los altares circulares en Sibun representan una mezcla híbrida de estilos locales y "extranjeros." Su distribución geográfica y temporal, combinada con su similitud arquitectónica, sugieren el establecimiento de una red extensa de altares circulares interconectados en las zonas bajas del Este durante el siglo IX del periodo clásico terminal.

Planteamos distintas posibilidades que podrían explicar la introducción de estas características "no-clásicas" en Belice. Por ejemplo, planteamos la posibilidad de diásporas comerciales que involucrasen migraciones en pequeña escala de comerciantes chontales. Del mismo modo, pudieron darse peregrinaciones durante las cuáles las elites locales habrían visitado centros importantes, como Chichen Itza, para participar en ceremonias políticas de adhesión que pudiesen luego ser implementadas al regresar a su propia región. Es posible que estos dos escenarios no fuesen mutuamente excluyentes entre sí. Por otro lado, sugerimos que las formas híbridas de la cultura material del Sibun—en este caso la arquitectura con una fusión de elementos locales y "extranjeros"—revelan un proceso de transculturación que ocurrió en múltiples escalas de interacción (tanto a nivel local y regional) y probablemente incluyó diversas variables, entre ellas el comercio local y a larga distancia, la migración a pequeña escala, relaciones diplomáticas entre las elites, y también el desarrollo *en situ*.

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