PART I

LIVING AT YAXUNÁ
Although the archaeological site of Yaxuná is not open to the public, the area is accessible by car. Driving east from Mérida on the federal highway toward Valladolid, one turns south at the tourist hub of Pisté, on the western edge of the ancient city of Chichén Itzá (figure 1.1). Following for twenty minutes a narrow road that crosses fields overgrown with thick, scrubby vegetation, one can begin to make out the looming acropolis groups that are near the road just before you enter the sleepy Maya hamlet of Yaxunáh (plate 1.1). The community’s name means “green house” or “first house” in Mayan, the latter a particularly relevant name considering the great antiquity of the ruins.

Now a hinterland locality of the Yaxcabá municipality, this space once formed part of a substantial Maya city. Its origins date back to the very beginning of Maya civilization and set the community on a course toward a highly complex series of transformations over its 2,000 years of pre-Hispanic occupation. Situated on a critical crossroad of Maya civilization, material evidence suggests that this community was founded on an inland trading route linking the emerging southern lowland kingdoms to the salt flats of the northern Yucatecan coast, a connection that likely contributed to the movement of people and ideas between the north and south for over a millennium (Freidel 1992, 2007; Stanton 2012; Suhler 1996). Yet its central location on the northern plains also placed Yaxuná on the fairly distinct cultural boundary between the eastern and western portions of the peninsula. In short, the location of Yaxuná exposed it to higher degrees of interregional contact within the Maya world than many of its peers on the northern plains, a situation we explore in this book using human remains.

While the burial data currently available from Yaxuná come primarily from Classic period contexts (no Formative period human remains have been recovered to date, and only two burials date to later contexts, one to the Postclassic and one to the Historic period), extensive material data from the site have been used to create a narrative of Yaxuná from its origins to its eventual state of ruin today. In this chapter we orient the reader to this narrative with the intention of placing the remains of the ancient Maya and their mortuary contexts in an
understandable cultural and historical framework that will help to contextualize our skeletal and mortuary data. We begin with a discussion of the previous work conducted at the site and then move to a period-by-period treatment of the cultural sequence as it stands today.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF RESEARCH AT YAXUNÁ

Yaxuná first called the attention of researchers working at Chichén Itzá during the 1920s and 1930s. The Carnegie Institution projects at Chichén Itzá and Uaxactún were the first to conduct large-scale systematic research in the Maya area (Kidder 1947; Morris et al. 1931; Ricketson and Ricketson 1937; Ruppert, 1931, 1935, 1943, 1950, 1952; A. Smith 1937, 1950; R. Smith 1955; Smith and Gifford 1966). Given the size and preservation of Chichén Itzá, as well as references to this city in ethnohistoric documents and the copious amount of
preserved iconography at the site, Sylvanus Morley established a research project there to serve as the cornerstone of what quickly evolved into a regional project with reconnaissance, mapping, and test excavations conducted at sites throughout the northern lowlands (e.g., Brainerd 1958; Ruppert and Smith 1957; R. Smith 1971). In particular, Yaxuná attracted the attention of the Carnegie archaeologists due to the fact that a long causeway (Sacbé 1—white road in Yucatec Maya) connected this city to the metropolis of Cobá located 100 km to the east. This raised road still stands as the longest Mesoamerican causeway known today (Morley 1927a, 1927b).

Although Bennett (1930) was the first explorer to record the sacbé, it was a cultural anthropologist working at the community of Chan Kom, near where the causeway passes, who first mapped it during the 1930s (Villa Rojas 1934; see figure 1.2). Impressed with the length of the causeway, the Carnegie archaeologists were particularly interested in how it might link the chronological sequence of Chichén Itzá (believed at the time to date primarily to the Early Postclassic [Brainerd 1958; Kidder 1930; Thompson 1954; Tozzer 1957]) to the Classic period Petén sequence of Uaxactún (R. Smith 1955; Smith and Gifford 1966). Given that one end of the sacbé ended at Yaxuná, located a mere 18 km to the southwest of Chichén Itzá (as measured between the site cores), Carnegie archaeologists decided to survey the site. During several short seasons they created a rough map and excavated test trenches in monumental contexts (Brainerd 1958).

Ceramic data from these early excavations at Yaxuná indicated that this city had both early (Late Formative and Early Classic) and late (Late and Terminal Classic) occupations (Brainerd 1958) that could bridge the chronology between the “old” and “new” empires. Most research in the north at this time was concentrated on the well-preserved Late and Terminal Classic architecture, leading to a perception that there was a “New Empire” in the north postdating the “Old Empire” of the south where research at the time had exposed earlier Formative and Early Classic occupations. In any event, Thompson and his colleagues (1932) believed that the later chronology of Chichén Itzá could be identified at Yaxuná and stratigraphically understood in relation to the earlier occupation they rightfully believed to exist there. Thus, research efforts targeted the early chronological sequence of Yaxuná together with its causeway connection to the Classic period city of Cobá, more readily associated with
the southern lowland chronology, given the Petén influence in the architecture, iconography, and hieroglyphic inscriptions (largely unreadable at the time) of this eastern city.

In the end the early explorations of Yaxuná (Brainerd 1940, 1958; Roberts 1933, 1935), of its long causeway (Villa Rojas 1934), and of Cobá (Thompson et al. 1932) did little to resolve the chronological placement of Chichén Itzá in reference to Uaxactún and other sites in the southern lowlands. At least for the site of Yaxuná itself, the survey did reveal to researchers that there was an important early northern lowland occupation (Thompson 1954). No human remains were ever reported by this project.

After these initial efforts, Yaxuná was largely forgotten by archaeologists during the following decades. Coggins (1983) noted that the only carved stela (figure 1.3), reported by Brainerd (1958), showed an individual who was garbed in the style of the Early Classic central highland metropolis of Teotihuacan (wearing a *pecten* shell necklace and feathers hanging from the back of his belt). This led scholars to cautiously engage the possibility of central Mexican contact with the northern Maya lowlands. At the time, such contact had been much better demonstrated for the central and southern lowlands, where a trove of monumental portraiture, laden with central highland symbolism and garb, made a strong case for direct cultural exchange with Central Mexico long before the Maya collapse and the rise of Chichén Itzá (Coggins 1975, 1977).

As the decipherment of Maya hieroglyphic writing and advancements in art history revolutionized our understanding of the Maya during the 1970s and 1980s, new light was cast on courtly life and the complex relationships among central lowland kingdoms and dynastic rule (Martin and Grube 2008). In particular, the Palenque Round Table Meetings served as a platform for researchers to better understand ancient sociopolitical dynamics during those years. Despite the progress, northern lowland centers such as Yaxuná were left out of the new narratives that were being created for Classic Maya society, as they lacked the extensive epigraphic texts and iconography that characterize their southern neighbors. If discussed, most northern cities were framed in terms of the southern data, as the idea of cultural variability between these two regions was still not being engaged at this time.

It was not until Andrews and Robles (1985) posited that Yaxuná functioned as a western outpost of the Late to Terminal Classic state of Cobá that interest in the site was revived. In their argument, Andrews and Robles assumed that Sacbé 1 served to integrate Yaxuná into a Cobaneco state rather than facilitating exchange and mobility among equals. This conjecture rested on the much greater size of Cobá in comparison to Yaxuná and on the patent lack of evidence (at this time) of Sotuta ceramics both at Cobá (Robles 1990) and Yaxuná (Brainerd 1958). In this scenario, Yaxuná was seen as the western stronghold of Cobá, one that served as a buffer to withstand the growing power of Chichén Itzá. Andrews and Robles elaborated on this conjecture to the point of speculating that Itzá warriors must have encountered “massive resistance” at Yaxuná (Andrews and Robles 1985:69).

The role of Yaxuná as a strategic border community in the heart of the northern Maya lowlands was to be tested by David Freidel (1987), who started work at the site in 1986. What was to follow was a decade of intensive field explorations, with the final season ending
in 1996 (see Stanton et al. 2010:1–4); laboratory work ended in 1997. During this period the site center was mapped and stratigraphic excavations were conducted in numerous areas of the site. In 1989 the first test excavations targeted both residential and civic contexts of the settlement (Freidel et al. 1990), and during the following seasons the test-pitting program was extended across the site core, specifically targeting domestic structures (Ardren et al. 1994; Suhler and Freidel 1993). More extensive excavations at two “elite” residential platforms near the site center (5E-52 and 5E-73 groups) were also undertaken, where three more burials were located (see Shaw 1998; Stanton 2000).

Other extensive excavations were directed at civic and/or monumental contexts in the site core. These excavations included, among others, Charles Suhler’s (1996) research of a pair of Formative period dance platforms located directly to the east of the East Acropolis. Traci Ardren (1997) explored the acropolis at Xkanhá, a peripheral Classic period architectural complex located two kilometers to the northwest of the site center, where she recovered

**FIGURE 1.3.** Carved stela, which displays an individual dressed in the style of the Early Classic central highland metropolis of Teotihuacan (photo by Yaxuná Project, Selz Foundation).
a single burial. Most of the extensive work was performed at the North Acropolis and specifically at structures 6F-3, 6F-4, and 6F-68 (Ambrosino 2003, 2007; Suhler 1996). Highlights of this research included two Early Classic royal tombs located in structures 6F-3 and 6F-4 (Ardren 2002; Suhler 1996; Suhler and Freidel 1998) and the discovery of an abandonment deposit interpreted as the remains of a desecratory termination ritual (cf. Stanton et al. 2008) at Str. 6F-68, including one disturbed human deposit (see Ambrosino 2002, 2007; Ambrosino et al. 2003; Ardren 1999). In all, six doctoral dissertations (Ambrosino 2007; Ardren 1997; Johnstone 2001; Shaw 1998; Stanton 2000; Suhler 1996) were completed from the Selz Foundation project work, and research was conducted in a wide range of contexts spanning the Middle Formative (Stanton 2000, 2005a; Stanton and Ardren 2005) to the Late Postclassic (Ardren 2003). Sadly, a preliminary study of the skeletal remains initiated by Sharon Bennett (1993) was never completed due to her premature death.

In 1997, Lourdes Toscano Hernández of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH) reinitiated excavations, focusing her efforts in the area between the North Acropolis and Central Acropolis. Her project was envisioned to open an area of the site for tourism and focused primarily in a segment of Yaxúná termed the Puuc Group, although excavation was also conducted at the terminus building for Saché 1 (Str. 6E-13) and several small civic structures in the center of the site core. The primary contribution of this project was the architectural seriation of the Early Puuc through Classic Puuc buildings in an area identified as an Early Puuc Ceremonial Complex (EPCC) (Novelo Rincón 2012). This project also identified a small Late/Terminal Classic (Sotuta) village among the ruins of the site (Toscano Hernández and Ortegón Zapata 2003). Several burials were recovered by this project but have not been included in our study.

Although Toscano Hernández and her team completed explorations and structural consolidation five years later, in the end Yaxúná was never opened to the public. In 2005, she followed up her work by conducting a salvage project on the road between the modern towns of Pisté and Yaxunáh. Over 200 structures in a 21 km wide by 40 m long transect along the road were tested or horizontally exposed (Toscano Hernández et al. 2005a, 2005b). This transect began in the western peripheral area of Chichén Itzá and ended right in the vicinity of the core of Yaxúná. Toscano Hernández (personal communication to Stanton, 2011) reported that nearly all of the structures in the survey date to the Late and Terminal Classic periods, thereby indicating a low level of rural settlement in the region prior to AD 600, similar to findings of the Proyecto de Interacción Política del Centro de Yucatán–(PIPCY) in a regional survey (Magnoni et al. 2016). Of note is the division in Slate Ware ceramics that Toscano Hernández and her team noted along the transect. While Cehpech-style ceramics were recovered from the excavations around the site of Popolá and to the south, Sotuta ceramics dominated the northern segment of the transect, indicating distinct ceramic distribution systems, possibly reflective of political tensions (cf. Freidel 1992, 2007) and/or distinct market economies (see Dahlin et al. 2007) during the Terminal Classic. Several burials were recovered by this project within the site boundaries of Yaxúná, but, once again, have not
been included in the present study. Around the same time of Toscano Hernández’s survey, Travis Stanton (2006) conducted a short regional survey in the area in preparation for a new project in the Yaxuná region. This work included sketch maps and surface collections at the surrounding sites of Ikil, X’telhú, and X’togil (figure 1.1).

In 2007, the PIPCY project was formally initiated by Travis Stanton, Scott Hutson, and Aline Magnoni (2008). This project was envisioned as a regional exploration of the area to the southwest of Chichén Itzá, with Yaxuná remaining the focus of work. Although the Selz Project had conducted limited mapping at a couple of sites in the region (specifically at X’telhú and Popolá, where carved monuments had been reported [Greene Robertson 1986]), not much regional work had been previously undertaken to understand the broader regional contexts. While the PIPCY project still continues (Stanton and Magnoni 2009a, 2009b, 2013, 2014a, 2014b), we briefly summarize the work to date in the following paragraphs.

Excavations at Yaxuná have concentrated on the 6E-30 Group (a large domestic platform in the southern portion of the site core spanning from the Middle Formative through the Terminal Classic periods), the 5E-50 Group (the probable Early Classic palace at the site [see Freidel et al. 1998]), the E-Group (a Formative period ritual space), and a large trash pit laid down on top of a collapsed cave associated with the North Acropolis (Gómez García 2012; Marengo Camacho 2013; Stanton and Marengo Camacho 2014; see figure 1.4).

Particularly interested in the origins of Yaxuná as a Middle Formative community (research at 6E-30 Group and the E-Group) and the impact that the founding and growth of the urban center of Chichén Itzá had on its surrounding hinterlands (research at the North Acropolis and smaller regional sites), the PIPCY project has made substantial progress in revising the narrative created by previous work. Additionally, a regional survey of over 500 km² is being conducted (primarily in the municipio of Yaxcabá). The survey has concentrated on surface sites as well as caves and cenotes (Slater 2014a; Stanton and Magnoni 2013). To date, in addition to numerous sketch maps and surface collections, large-scale mapping efforts have been conducted at the sites of Ikil, Joya, Popolá, X-auil, and X-Panil (Hutson et al. 2012b; Johnson 2012; Magnoni et al. 2014a; Robles Salmerón et al. 2011; Stanton and Magnoni 2013), and LIDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) survey has been conducted over parts of the region. Test excavations have been conducted at Cacalchén, Ikil, Joya, Popolá, and X-Panil, while more extensive horizontal excavations have carried out in domestic contexts at Ikil and Popolá, as well as in caves at Aktun Jip, Aktun Kuruxtun, Ceh’ Yax, and Ikil (Johnson 2012, 2014; Slater 2014a, 2014b; Stanton and Magnoni 2014a).

Since 2011, PIPCY has cultivated a close collaboration with the team working at the Laboratory of Bioarchaeology and Histology at the Autonomous University of Yucatan, Mérida (UADY). The joint efforts include on-site burial recording, restoration, inventory, lab analyses, and, in the case of the burials recovered by the Selz Foundation project, also interpretation of photographic imagery. Additional scholarly input has been provided by a host of archaeometric analyses, the results of which are treated profusely in chapters 2 through 7. Zooarchaeological studies conducted on material from both the PIPCY and Selz projects
FIGURE 1.4. Map of Yaxuná highlighting major groups and the structures where human remains were found.
have also contributed to a more complete understanding of the human skeletal remains, specifically in terms of dietary preferences and accessibility of resources, topics discussed in chapters 3, 4, and 7. These studies have been conducted and reported by our UADY (late) colleague Christopher Götz (Götz and Stanton 2013).

THE ORIGINS OF YAXUNÁ

Since Suhler’s (1996; see also Johnstone 2001) assertion that Yaxuná was established as a “green-field community” around 500 BC, much more work has been advanced across the Maya lowlands concerning the origins of Maya civilization and Yaxuná in particular. First and foremost we now have a better understanding of human occupation on the Yucatán Peninsula prior to settled life. A group of divers has recently discovered a submerged cenote floor, which they found littered with extinct late Pleistocene animals and a single female adolescent, presumably the oldest directly dated human remain in the Americas at 12,000–13,000 BP (Chatters et al. 2014; Tiesler 2016). Named Naia by those working on the context, this teenager had fallen into a large underground sinkhole, most likely after getting lost inside the extensive network of dark karstic tunnels. A broad interdisciplinary study, now under the umbrella of the INAH-led Hoyo Negro Project, is currently working on a fuller reconstruction of living conditions during this important early period of human occupation on the peninsula (Tiesler 2016). Naia probably represents the first known wave of continental immigrants (Chatters et al. 2014); back then, the climate was more temperate and the peninsular shelf itself was much larger than it is today because of a much lower sea level during the last ice age at the end of the Pleistocene era. Apart from this isolated finding, we know vaguely that the Yucatán Peninsula was inhabited by early Paleoindian populations, although still very little is known about these people (see Chatters et al. 2014; González González et al. 2006, 2008). The Archaic period is slightly better understood, although most of the finds have been limited either to haphazard cave findings, just as the one described above (e.g., Iceland 2005; Lohse 2010), or have been found mixed with later Middle Formative materials (M. Kathryn Brown, personal communication to Stanton 2013).

Settled life appears around 1100–900 BC in areas across the Maya lowlands; it is at this time that ceramics appear, marking the beginning of the Middle Formative in this area of Mesoamerica (figure 1.5). While there is still much to be learned concerning the transition from Archaic period lifestyles and conditions to sedentary communities that depended on agricultural lifeways, evidence indicates a gradual rise in population over the course of the Middle Formative.

Incipient sacred centers, particularly early E-Groups, were initially established as gathering places that functioned to facilitate social interaction and identity construction much like Poverty Point or Göbekli Tepe (Inomata et al. 2015; Stanton et al. n.d.a). To put this idea in less abstract and more institutional terms, people with relatively mobile lifestyles who were practicing gardening to supplement wild food sources may have found gathering together at
particular places and at particular times of the year to be useful for exchanging goods, adjudicating disputes, arranging marriages, practicing healing rituals, and celebrating common relations with the supernatural world. Such collective interests required leaders of some kind to organize the design, construction, and maintenance of such places. While leaders can emerge from existing institutions such as families and larger kin groups, they often act as agents in the innovation of new institutions that crosscut kin groups and sustain larger communities.

![Chronology at Yaxuná in comparison to other lowlands Maya sites.](image)

**FIGURE 1.5.** Chronology at Yaxuná in comparison to other lowlands Maya sites.
through the very act of making and maintaining centers. Just how such new institutional agents eventually emerged as members of councils and rulers remains difficult to define, but we review the evidence in hand. Given the presence of a large E-Group from the center at Yaxuná itself, we are confident that local leaders participated in pan-peninsular institutions, sodalities being a neutral term for such brotherhoods and sisterhoods (Service 1975), from the beginning. Over time these centers grew. The regional populations who maintained some degree of residential mobility eventually settled and adopted agriculture as a way of life.

Settling and the adoption of agriculture appears to be the scenario at early Yaxuná as well. In our study region we have found Pleistocene faunal remains (Slater 2014a) but no clear evidence of human activity despite the pollen evidence suggesting some forest clearance prior to, or around the time of, the appearance of pottery (Zimmerman 2013; see also Leyden 2002; Leyden et al. 1998). Excavations at the E-Group indicate that the first floor was constructed around 900–800 BC if not slightly earlier. These dates correlate well with a ceramic deposit dated to the ninth century BC consisting of a fragmented Yotolín Burnished vessel mixed with Early Nabanché Complex ceramics lying directly on top of a level containing the Pleistocene remains in Aktun Kuruxtun (Slater 2014a).

The above-mentioned E-Group is indeed the earliest dated context at Yaxuná, although Middle Formative Early Nabanché ceramics have been found in various areas of the site (Stanton 2000, n.d.a; Stanton and Ardren 2005). Ek Complex ceramics have also been documented from the early settlement, in particular with the earliest floors of the E-Group and below a Classic period residential group just south of the E-Group. Nevertheless, their study is as yet inconclusive, and the attributes of these ceramics, primarily defined by their wash surface treatment and burnishing, appear to vary somewhat from materials reported from Komchén and Tzubil. The Ek Complex has been redated to about 1000–800 BC by Andrews and his colleagues (2008; see also Andrews 1983, 1988, 1990; Ceballos Gallareta and Robles Castellanos 2012), who believe it to be the earliest Middle Formative ceramic complex in the northern lowlands.

Throughout the Middle Formative (900–300/250 BC) the community at Yaxuná appears to have maintained long-distance ties to the southern Petén region of the lowlands. The presence from the very beginning of what appears to be an early E-Group, a very southern lowland architectural complex, indicates strong ties to Petén from the time Yaxuná is initially established (Stanton n.d.a; Stanton and Collins n.d.a, n.d.b). Whether this nonlocal architectural tradition at Yaxuná represents the founding of Yaxuná as a center by southern lowland Maya or an attempt by northern lowland Maya, who heavily interacted with the south to create some type of affinity with their southern peers through built environment and ritual practice alike, is unknown and maybe moot. The important facts here are that it is a large E-Group, a la par with those in the southern lowlands, and that is it hundreds of kilometers north of the nearest southern lowland E-Groups. So while in the south E-Groups appear to have emerged in a constellation of adjacent early centers (Doyle 2012, 2013a, 2013b), Yaxuná appears to have been a distinct cosmopolitan salient in the north. During this era we also see relatively high numbers of southern lowland ceramic styles (such as Pital Group material), a
situation also reflected in the northwestern portion of the peninsula during Early Nabanché times (Ceballos Gallareta and Robles Castellanos 2012). This is the only other region where early E-Groups have been positively identified on the northern plains. These data could indicate that Yaxuná was established early on as a node of a pan-peninsular inland trade route between Petén and the northern salt flats, a route that many centuries later, during the Terminal Classic, would be coveted by the Itzá (Stanton n.d.a).

By the end of the Middle Formative, Yaxuná had grown to the level of a sizable town and the only center of any consequence in north-central Yucatán, an area with little evidence of settled life apart from Yaxuná. A handful of Middle Formative ceramics have been recovered at Ikil, Popolá, and X-Panil, but there is little to indicate that these communities were anything but small hamlets at this time. The Selz Foundation Yaxuná Project discovered an intriguing Olmec and Middle Formative style sculpture of a head at Popolá when first recording the building of the bas-reliefs there (Magnoni et al. 2014b). This sculpture in the round, with puffy eyes, full cheeks, fat lips, and ear flanges, and visible from all sides, is well outside the canons of lowland Maya art known for the area. Such freestanding isolated surface finds are known elsewhere in the northern lowlands. Yet all we can say is that Popolá lies geographically between Yaxuná and the northern coast, a logical trade route as we note above.

By around 400–250 BC major architectural modifications occurred along the principal east-west axis of the site defined by the E-Group. The floor was substantially raised and a large quatrefoil symbol was carved into the center of the plaza (Stanton and Collins n.d.a, n.d.b). This activity is slightly earlier than the construction of two dance platforms in a then-open area to the east (Suhler 1996). Both platforms have a series of internal corridors shaped as quadrfoils, a symbol later associated with the World Turtle and the resurrection of the Maize God, just like the ones depicted on the West Wall of the Pinturas Building at San Bartolo (Saturno 2009; Taube et al. 2010). This mural dates to the first century BC at the latest, and the quatrefoil portal was already a pan-Mesoamerican Middle Formative Ceremonial Complex icon by the middle of the first millennium BC, famously depicted at Chalcatzingo in Morelos. These icons underscore the religiously cosmopolitan nature of Yaxuná and its early role as a ceremonial center.

Significantly, these icons are also associated with the emergence of Middle Formative rulership. We believe that the sacred space of Yaxuná was expanded to incorporate larger groups of people (those with a sedentary lifestyle at Yaxuná and the rural hamlets across the local landscape, as well as those who could have possibly continued a more mobile lifeway). It is probable that (1) as more people adopted maize-based agriculture as a staple source of subsistence at the end of the Middle Formative and the transition to the Late Formative, calendrical rituals associated with the agricultural cycle became increasingly important; and (2) emerging sodalities of leaders used public celebrations and concomitant economic exchange to leverage their positions within the community, guiding their growing constituencies down a path of increased social hierarchy, role differentiation, and institutional complexity that would reach greater heights during the Classic period.
THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE EARLY STATE IN THE LATE AND TERMINAL FORMATIVE

Beginning with William Coe’s (1965) landmark article outlining the Formative construction sequence of the North Acropolis at Tikal, archaeologists have been aware of a stage of lowland high civilization preceding the Classic period and segueing into it. A School of American Research seminar reviewed the evidence throughout the lowlands as of the early seventies (Adams 1977). In that decade, discoveries at Cerro Maya (Freidel 1979, 1981), Cuello (Hammond 1980), and Lamanai (Pendergast 1981) in Belize affirmed this reality and demonstrated that Formative civilization existed in much of the lowlands, not just in the interior heartland. Research at Yaxuná itself was in part prompted by the search for more examples of this Formative phase of civilization in the northern lowlands, especially following the discoveries at the Formative center of Komchén by E. Wyllys Andrews V and his team (Andrews et al. 1984). The more specific question of state development during the Late Formative (300/250 BC–AD 1) and Terminal Formative (AD 1–250/300) has been a topic of discussion among Maya archaeologists since the 1970s and was strengthened by work starting in the 1980s in the Mirador Basin that revealed very large and complex communities in this heartland area (e.g., Clark et al. 2000; Dahlin 1984; Hansen et al. 2008). Freidel (1979) challenged the notion of a Core Area and a Periphery in the Maya lowlands posited by William Rathje (1971) as a means of explaining the dynamics of initial innovation and spread of state institutions. He proposed instead, based on the precocious sites in Belize, that polities arose throughout the lowlands through regional interaction of local elites. The discovery that the massive sites of the El Mirador area dated to the Formative period strengthened Rathje’s Core Area hypothesis, but ongoing research shows that some Periphery sites, such as Cerro Maya and Yaxuná, were linked to the El Mirador area as strategic economic and political salient cities during the Formative period. The extent of this regional pattern remains to be elucidated, but sites such as El Tigre (Vargas Pacheco 2008) on the Candelaria River in Campeche and Ichkabal in east central Quintana Roo near the Caribbean littoral, and a constellation of small cosmopolitan communities in northwestern Yucatán (Andrews and Robles Castellanos 2004) appear to be promising places to pursue links and routes to the Core Area.

At Yaxuná itself we recognize many trends that are similar to the changes that occurred at southern lowlands sites in the Mirador zone (and elsewhere) during the latter part of the Formative. The town witnessed an increase in population, a tremendous program of monumental construction (specifically triadic acropolis groups), and, following the strong Middle Formative ceramic affiliations with the south, a maintenance and enhancement of such interaction with Chicanel-style ceramics. By the Terminal Formative, sometimes referred to as the Protoclassic (Brady et al. 1998; Pring 1977), a more local ceramic “Flaky Wàre” tradition began to dominate the ceramic assemblages of the western and central northern plains, including Yaxuná (Glover and Stanton 2010). The E-Group at Yaxuná continued to be the focal point for public ritual at the site. This complex was expanded with a raised stucco
walkway marking its central axis. While we suspect that the Central Acropolis has a Middle Formative substructure, we have few data from the complex other than it reached a height of 21 m by the Late Formative (Stanton 2000). As mentioned, the Central Acropolis was sheathed in finely dressed monolithic blocks, a stylistic signature of Late Middle to Late Formative architecture in the Mirador area at Nakbé and El Mirador (Hansen 1998), including the massive Danta complex.

Richard Hansen (1998) has made an influential case for the triadic design in Formative public acropolises as a type of royal architecture. His arguments draw on analogies from southern lowland Classic period triadic groups with clear expressions of royal performances such as the Group of the Cross at Palenque. Yet he also makes use of iconographic evidence from well-preserved Late Formative complexes such as Group H at Uaxactún (Valdés 1992). Freidel and Schele (1988; see also Freidel et al. 1993) also identified the iconography of Late Formative façades as referencing divine kingship. There are really two distinct triadic arrangements: a triangular one and an in-line series of three building platforms or secondary substructures on top of a long one. The former design resembles the eastern range of E-Groups, but it can occur independently as found at Cerro Maya in the case of Str. 29 (Freidel 1986; Schele and Freidel 1990) and at N10-53 and N9-56 at Lamanai (Pendergast 1981). Hansen references the triangular arrangement’s potential cosmic association with the First (Green) Three Stone Place of Maya creation myths as proposed by Freidel and his colleagues (1993) and discussed by Karl Taube (1998). That mythical place is, in turn, associated with apotheosis of the Maize God.

We now know from David Stuart (2014) that the deity referenced in relation to the First Three Stone Place in the Palenque myth is not the Maize God but a creator god named One Tooth Person, whom he identifies as the sun emerging reborn from the eastern sea (Stuart 2010). One of the names of this deity on the Panel of the Cross at Palenque is the rain god Chaak. Stuart cogently hypothesizes that this deity, traditionally called GI, is the sun god who brings the rains that annually return from the east. GI, the watery sun, is strongly related to the religious precepts of divine rulership in the Classic period. While we will have more to say about this deity in our discussion of Early Classic Burial 23 in chapter 7, we agree with the working hypothesis that Triadic Groups relate to Formative period rulership.

Several triadic acropolis groups were built in Yaxuná proper and in the general vicinity of the site during the Late Formative. Both the North Acropolis and East Acropolis were founded at this time; the East Acropolis was established as the locus of ritual performance space on the east-west axis of the E-Group and replaced the dance platforms for their ritual termination. We suspect that the 5E-30 Group was also founded at this time, marking the southern terminus of the Late Formative Sacbé 3 (the North Acropolis serving as the northern terminus), although we lack the deep stratigraphic sequence to confirm this hypothesis. We know for certain only that the group was abandoned at some point during the Terminal Formative (Stanton 2000; Stanton et al. 2010).

Str. 5E-19, with its sizable Middle Formative substructure (Stanton and Ardren 2005), was modified into a Late Formative triadic group as well. Finally, two Late Formative style triadic
groups are located off to the north and east of the Yaxuná site center; one of these groups is classified as the site of Tzacauil and is associated with Late Formative occupation (Garza and Kurjack 1980; Hutson et al. 2012a). The identification of these triadic groups is significant as this architectural form was much more popular in the southern lowlands than in the north. We believe that this is indicative of the continuing intimate connection between Yaxuná and Petén, which is also suggested by the continued presence of southern lowland ceramics. Yet the construction of these triadic acropolis groups, by itself, demonstrates Yaxuná’s success and growth through the Formative period. Settlement studies indicate that the residential extension of the site reached its maximum during the Late to Terminal Formative (Stanton 2000; Stanton and Magnoni 2009a)—possibly matched, but not eclipsed, during the Terminal Classic. The two eastern triadic groups were integrated to the Yaxuná site core by causeways, which lead back toward the site center, specifically in the direction of the E-Group. We take these data to indicate that Yaxuná was successful in attracting people (possibly from its hinterlands as well as from other established communities farther afield) through its success as a regional ritual, social, and economic hub. We do not see any evidence of a substantial rural population to date. There is perhaps slightly more evidence of a Late and Terminal Formative rural occupation than one during the Middle Formative, but the sample size remains so reduced as to render the trend statistically meaningless.

While we have explicit data concerning rulership during the Early Classic in the form of royal tombs, the question of governance during the Late to Terminal Formative at Yaxuná remains to be seen. Until we have discovered relevant interments dating to the Formative we are challenged to work with the data in hand regarding such an institution. In general, royal interments dating to the Formative are very rare (e.g., Agrinier 1964; A. F. Chase and D. Z. Chase 2011; Krejci and Culbert 1995), an exception being the tombs at Tikal in its North Acropolis (W. Coe 1965). The data in hand (Stanton and Freidel 2005) suggest that some kings acceded in the dance platform complex. While inferential, the scale of the public architecture in the site zone reinforces the view that Yaxuná was a center administered by kings by the advent of the Late Formative period. This view is commensurate with the supposition that Late Formative triadic complexes in major sites like Yaxuná are associated with kingship in the Maya lowlands as discussed above.

A pressing question is the nature of such kingship and its variability in institutional expression in both time and space. Freidel (n.d.) is of the view that Formative lowland Maya kingship was elective in some fashion and not predicated on primogeniture or patrilineal succession. This was generally the case with Classic kingship in the southern Maya lowland polities raising carved stone stelae celebrating the pedigree of rulers. Such a hypothesis suggests that Formative period kings were likely interred in residences rather than in public buildings. The absence of Formative tombs in buildings at Yaxuná is not evidence in favor of such a notion, but the cenotaphic offering in one of the dance platforms (Stanton and Freidel 2005; Suhler 1996) supports this scenario. Moreover, the raising of multiple triadic groups during the Late Formative suggests that rulership had already evolved significantly from the Middle Formative when the Central Acropolis and E-Group appear to have been
the singular focus of ritual attention at Yaxuná. Naturally, we can only speculate if the multiplicity represents a council of many kings until we have a better grasp of the stratigraphic construction history of the acropolis groups. Alternatively, we may assume that each king raised his (or her) own triadic group during this Late Formative era of institutionalization to be then maintained by heirs. This kind of succession-based proliferation of ceremonial complexes, temples, or palaces occurs in many ancient and historical kingdoms (e.g., Tenochtitlan, Chan Chan, and Abomey [e.g., Moseley and Day 1982]). In either of these possible scenarios for Early Classic Yaxuná the major change in civic-religious space is a move from a single, visually and physically accessible center to a composite one composed of several places with more restricted access, although connected by processional routes that transformed them into one broader religious space.

THE COMING OF KINGS IN THE EARLY CLASSIC

The transition to the Early Classic (AD 250/300–500) at Yaxuná is complex. Evidence strongly indicates that many monumental buildings were abandoned and left to fall into ruin during the Terminal Formative, although the pace and pattern of this abandonment is unclear given the current dating. By the third or fourth century AD the East Acropolis, Central Acropolis, 5E-30 Group, 5E-19 Group, and the E-Group were left to fall into ruin. We suspect that the two eastern triadic groups were also abandoned around this time; we currently have evidence only from Tzacauil to support this notion. Data from residential areas of the site core suggest a lower population within the site compared to the Terminal Formative, although we are wary to assign hard numbers to estimate populations (Stanton 2000; Stanton and Collins n.d.a). Besides the development of a new peripheral group, Xkanhá, two kilometers to the northwest of the Yaxuná site center (Ardren 1997), there continues to be very little evidence of settlement outside of Yaxuná proper throughout the region.

It is of note that since the 1990s, archaeologists, geologists, and geographers have been investigating the possibility that Late Formative lowland civilization experienced a regional collapse in some way analogous to the famous ninth century AD collapse in the southern lowlands (see Hansen et al. 2002; Gill 2000; Gunn et al. 2002; Hodell et al. 1995, 2005, 2007). What is certain is that the city of El Mirador suffered political collapse and significant cessation of public construction at the end of the Late Formative, probably the second century AD; many, but not all, of the satellite cities in the Mirador zone also experienced political collapse and the cessation of monumental construction. To the north of the Mirador zone, the same thing happened at Yaxnohcah. Cerro Maya also collapsed as a center in this era. The collapse of Yaxuná as a political and religious center at the same time is unsurprising to us given our hypothesis that it was a salient of the Late Formative Mirador state and a vital node on the inland salt route from the northern coast. It is equally unsurprising that the city eventually recovered in the ensuing Early Classic period, as the salt route would have served surviving and reviving communities in the southern lowlands.
When the city center revived at Yaxuná during the Early Classic, we note substantial construction at the North Acropolis, one of the Formative triadic groups. Two of the three major structures on the acropolis were excavated during the 1990s, and both have major Early Classic construction phases and royal tombs (which we will discuss in greater detail in chapter 7). Charles Suhler (1996) encountered Burial 23 right on top of the Formative architecture, indicating that this ruler’s mortuary monument represents the first construction activity at the locus during the Early Classic. This stratigraphy suggests that the king and his council refurbished and used the existing Formative pyramid during his lifetime and then claimed it as a place for the community to worship him in death. Surface inspection of the southern pyramid in the acropolis shows that it has a terrace of monolithic blocks across the middle; blocks were likely quarried from the abandoned Central Acropolis façade, and this is some evidence for possible Early Classic refurbishment of this pyramid in the time of the Burial 23 king. Certainly Str. 6F-4 on the east side of the group witnessed Early Classic refurbishment. The tomb in Str. 6F-3 is in a prominent position anchoring the overall north-south axis of the site established in the Late Formative period (Stanton and Freidel 2005). We argue that it represents the revival and transformation of divine kingship in the community. As discussed above we think that divine kingship was already an institution well established at Yaxuná in light of the triadic groups and the posited royal accession dance platforms of the early Late Formative Period (Stanton and Freidel 2005; Suhler 1996). That said, the ruler interred in Burial 23 evinces a remarkable combination of southern lowland style ceramics and some southern lowland style royal regalia, such as a Maize God pectoral in the groin area, and some northern lowland style royal insignia, particularly northern lowland style greenstone huunal jewels in the vicinity of his head (Freidel and Suhler 1995). This king’s entombment establishes at Yaxuná the hallmark southern lowland practice of placing divine kings in central public buildings. His arrival also marks the resurgence of public construction at Yaxuná following the political collapse of the Late to Terminal Formative center. We think he was likely a foreigner to Yaxuná from the south, but with some traditional ties to northern polities as seen in his royal crown jewels. There are some contextual and iconographic reasons to speculate that he was a lord of Kaanal, the historically prominent kingdom to the south with its Early Classic capital at Dzibanché in Quintana Roo (Martin and Grube 2000; Velásquez García 2004). Research at Yo’okop in Quintana Roo (Shaw and Johnstone 2006a) discovered a glyphic reference to a Kaanal king, Sky Witness, who was responsible for the conquest of Tikal in AD 562 (Martin and Grube 2008). Burial 23 is more than one century earlier than this historical ruler, but Kaanal king K’altuun Hiix was certainly expanding his realm to the south by AD 520, and it is possible that he or his predecessors were interested in reestablishing command of the potentially lucrative overland salt trade to the south in the time of the ruler who was laid to rest in Burial 23.

There is also some evidence from Str. 6E-14 that the Early Classic witnessed, possibly under the ruler in Burial 23, a recentering of the site with the construction of this radial temple. This building really is at the center of the overall Late Formative civic-religious design, including the massive abandoned buildings mentioned above and the masonry causeway...
from it that leads south toward this center point. The ceramic data and monolithic masonry
design of Str. 6E-14, probably made with blocks quarried from the adjacent Central Acropo-
lis, suggest that this building was constructed in the Terminal Formative or early phase of the
Early Classic period. Dzibilchaltún to the northwest of Yaxuná has a famous Classic period
radial structure that was a tower suitable for accession rituals (Suhler et al. 1998b). It is quite
possible that Str. 6E-14 was such an accession building designed to reinitiate the govern-
ment and power of Yaxuná in the way that the famous Terminal Classic King Wātul Abtal of
Ceibal did in his radial structure there.

Another area of the site that figures prominently in the Early Classic construction pro-
gram is the residential area just to the south of the E-Group. Surface collections indicate that
several of the large residential platforms to the north of Sacbé 5 have substantial Early Classic
occupations. Excavations in the 5E-50 Group, the probable royal palace (Freidel et al. 1998),
demonstrate that Str. 5E-52 was first constructed during the Terminal Formative. The only
clearly discernible substructure beneath the Early Classic palace was burned, and there were
abundant large fragments of ceramics that suggested a termination ritual had taken place
(cf. Pagliaro et al. 2003; Stanton et al. 2008). The two radiocarbon samples from this deposit
indicate a second or third century AD date for the burning. Again, El Mirador appears to
have politically collapsed in the second century AD, and there are Terminal Formative ter-
mination ritual deposits on buildings there. Whether the burning of the Yaxuná palace locus
was part of the regional social unrest of that era or was an expression of later turbulence as the
city suffered its own collapse and halting Early Classic revival is difficult to determine with
the data in hand.

In the Early Classic period construction of the North Acropolis, Burial 24 in Str. 6F-4 is
no doubt associated with a violent transition in divine kingship at Yaxuná. That deposit is,
along with Burial 23, the focus of chapter 7. This multiple interment, buried deep within the
platform adjacent to the eastern temple of the North Acropolis, terminates ritually the city’s
dynastic rule (Ambrosino et al. 2001; Stanton et al. 2010; Suhler et al. 2004). Its chrono-
logical range (late Early Classic) falls into Tikal’s Manik III construction period, which is
substantiated by the Teotihuacanoid ceramics among the offerings. Here again, polychrome
vessels and carved jadeites show birds and sak hunal greenstones, along with a host of other
artifacts and ornaments. The simultaneous multiple context included 12 bodies, including
one half-cremated corpse and several seated bodies whom we assume to be the dynastic fam-
ily. The marks of perimortem violence and fresh wounds that their skeletons display indicate
to us that violence must have accommodated the replacement of dynastic power at this time.

THE LATE CLASSIC GREAT ROAD

While the end of the Early Classic at Yaxuná has been a bit of an enigma (Johnstone 2001;
Suhler 1996; Suhler et al. 1998a, 1998b), the beginning of the Late Classic (AD 500–700)
has been overwhelmingly characterized as the incorporation of Yaxuná into a conquest
state emanating out of the metropolis of Cobá (Andrews and Robles 1985; Freidel 1992, 2007; Schele and Freidel 1990; Shaw 1998; Stanton and Freidel 2005; Suhler and Freidel 1998; Suhler et al. 1998a, 1998b; see also Loya González 2008; Loya González and Stanton 2013, 2014). Despite early interpretations of the causeway being used up to Terminal Classic times, ceramic analysis of the terminal deposits on Sacbé 1 by Dave Johnstone (2001; Shaw and Johnstone 2001, 2006b) indicate that the use of this feature as a primary thoroughfare ceased by the end of the Late Classic. Excavations by both Traci Ardren and Lourdes Toscano Hernández revealed that the construction phase of the causeway terminus building (Str. 6E-13) that joined Sacbé 1 likewise dates to the Late Classic, indicating a relatively short use of this feature.

The possibility of assigning the construction of the sacbé to the seventh century AD is appealing given what we know about the epigraphy of Cobá. Building off of David Stuart (2010) and Sven Gronemeyer’s (2004) separate analyses of identifiable rulers at Cobá, Guenter (2014) has proposed that a woman kalomte (queen) from Cobá ruled from about AD 640–681. Lady K’awiil Ajaw was a bellicose queen, and her surviving iconographic corpus depicts her standing over 12 captives. Guenter argues that she either incorporated Yaxuná into a seventh-century conquest state or that Cobá’s controlled territories were consolidated under her watch.

In any event, the archaeology at Yaxuná demonstrates that the sacbé could have been constructed during her reign or even prior to it, but that it was no longer in use soon after her reign was over, suggesting that Cobá’s political reach did not extend to Yaxuná after AD 700. The political achievement of constructing such a long sacbé between two centers cannot be overestimated. It must have required the acquiescence and collaboration of all of the communities along the 100 km long route. Given the territorial scale of lowland polities estimated by most archaeologists, this route traversed numerous realms. Freidel (2007; see also Andrews and Robles 1985) agrees with the proposal that it was primarily a military feature designed to project armed force rapidly from Cobá into the north central interior of Yucatán. This would have ameliorated the necessity of maintaining a large garrison at Yaxuná. While it had a functional surfacing it would also have served the purpose of moving traders, ambassadors, and others privileged to walk on it between the communities it encompassed. It would make best sense to us if Lady K’awiil Ajaw, clearly a great ruler of the dominant city in the northeastern peninsula, commissioned the sacbé. Guenter (2014) makes a reasonable, if not uncontested, case epigraphically for Lady K’awiil Ajaw as a powerful ruler independent of the Kaanal regime of Yuknoom Ch’een the Great in that she acceded to the throne of Cobá as ruler, an act unrivaled by contemporary queens to the south who were related to him.

Still, it is hard to imagine that these rulers were other than allies, for Yuknoom Ch’een successfully prosecuted war in the southern lowlands throughout his reign and showed no concern for any military adversary on his northern borders, at least if we believe the official records etched in stone. Both Cobá and the Classic Kaanal kingdom of Dzibanché likely had ancient roots, and we suspect they may have been both descendants of the diaspora from Formative Kaanal. Certainly Guenter’s analysis of Cobá’s rulers shows that they did not practice
patrilineal succession there as did dynasties in the southern lowlands. In this political panorama of Kanaal allies, Lady K’awiil Ajaw may have carried out the violent termination of Str. 6F-4’s final phase if Teotihuacan-Tikal allies built it and sacrificed the royalty interred in Burial 24. That desecration was left open and abandoned thereafter, perhaps as a memorial to the slain as the tomb chamber was spared and left just under the surface of the ruin, although this possibility remains a hypothesis at the present time.

During the Late Classic, Yaxuná maintained a sizable population. Showing a substantial increase over Early Classic demographic levels (Shaw 1998), we are finally able to perceive a rural population in the region with small hamlets present at several sites including Ikil, Joya, and Popolá. Yet the amount of civic construction at Yaxuná was negligible, nearly as low as when it was reduced to a small Late/Terminal Classic village after the rise of Chichén Itzá (see Toscano Hernández and Ortegón Zapata 2003). One of the few civic buildings identified to the period is Str. 6F-11, a then freestanding structure just to the south of the North Acropolis (Novelo Rincón 2012). This building has an unusual carved monument, that may be a halved stela, with a hieroglyphic text abutting its eastern face. While the majority of the hieroglyphs are eroded, the one legible glyph is chiakba, an axe glyph. While speculative, there is a possibility that this monument commemorates the incorporation of Yaxuná into an expanding seventh-century Cobá state. In any regard, after more than a millennium and a half of constant renegotiations of the civic plan, the monumental center is practically shut down, and there is no evidence of local rulership (Stanton and Freidel 2005).

Given the continued presence of Petén polychromes at the site, it appears that the inland trade route along which Yaxuná was situated was still open. Loya González and Stanton (2013, 2014) have argued that Cobá established Yaxuná as the western frontier of its kingdom to control passage along that route leading to the northern salt flats, thus giving Cobá access to an important inland trade route in addition to its access to the Caribbean coastal networks through its probable ports of Muyil, Tancah, and Xelhá (cf. Canché Manzanero 1992).

**TERMINAL CLASSIC REVITALIZATION**

Soon after the death of Lady K’awiil Ajaw, evidence suggests that Sacbé 1 fell into disuse and the political influence from Cobá vanished. Freidel (2007) observed that Villa Rojas’s (1934) report on Sacbé 1 described improvised stone barriers across it at various points between Yaxuná and Cobá. He thought that these barriers may have been constructed by the Chan Santa Cruz rebel Maya during the nineteenth-century Caste War (1847–1901). However, Freidel noted that without a prepared surface of gravel and marl, Sacbé 1 would have been difficult to move on quickly, and moreover that the wilderness on the sacbé would have made existing nineteenth-century trails much more useful. So he proposed that the barriers should date to the pre-Columbian era—namely, the Terminal Classic period—when a running series of military confrontations along the sacbé must have turned the causeway into a moving battle strip. While Freidel thought that the battlefield materialized wars between Chichén
Itzá and Cobá, it is much more likely considering the current data that the obstructed *sacbé* segmented the battlegrounds between Cobá and the Puuc cities of the west.

It is already during the first half of the eighth century AD that architectural styles from the western portion of the peninsula begin to appear at Yaxúná and at a wide number of sites throughout the region. One site in particular, where fine veneer architecture occurs, is Ek’ Balam, whose earliest named king, Ukit Kan Lek Tok’, acceded to the throne in AD 770. Given that the mural of the 96 glyphs stipulates that this king arrived at the site and the “king of Tlalol was made” (Lacadena 2002), we might suspect that the spread of Puuc styles may have been accompanied by a process of incursions of western Maya coming out of the Puuc into central Yucatan. This interpretation fits very well in Andrews and Robles’s (1985) original model of northern lowland sociopolitical dynamics.

At Yaxúná we do not see the clear arrival of a king during the eighth century AD in the form of entombed ancestral shrines. Yet we do witness evidence from Uxmal and a program of architectural construction that revitalizes the civic core of the city, which still during the Late Classic period had been left to fall into ruins (Kowalski 1986, 1987). This could have occurred *a la par* with numerous other sites further south (e.g., Jasaw Chan K’awiil of Tikal), where similar construction programs appear to have been commissioned by powerful rulers. From around AD 700/750–850/900, numerous central buildings at the site were given new façades. The sequence of construction is difficult to understand in many cases, but we securely know that the majority of the major architectural groups (Central Acropolis, East Acropolis, North Acropolis, and the 5E-19 Group) were renovated. The development of new western cultural influences is most patent at Yaxúná in the so-called Puuc Group, which denotes a series of structures immediately to the south and southwest of the North Acropolis. Using a seriation of architectural styles based on his experience working around Kabah, Novelo Rincón (2012) has pieced together the chronology of the complex using his excavation data gleaned from the INAH project. In its final state the complex is a polygonal group very similar to the Early Puuc Ceremonial Complex, or EPCC, defined by Nick Dunning (1992). These are polygonal arrangements of buildings replete with ramps and masonry towers. They are covered with stucco that would have looked like very large stela (May Ciau 2000; see also Smyth et al. 1998; Stanton et al. 2003). These ramps, as well as two towers with as yet unpublished anthropomorphic figures, were also found at this group (see Novelo Rincón 2012). Further, the only known ballcourt at Yaxúná, also dating to this period, is also found just to the southeast of the group (Ardren et al. 1994). The EPCC has been interpreted as an administrative center and is reported throughout the Puuc region (Dunning 1992; Yant 2014); the best-dated example comes from Kuic where it is placed in the early Late Classic period (AD 650–700) by Yant (2014). To our knowledge, the Yaxúná example of the EPCC is the only one reported outside of the western part of the peninsula. Of note, there is also ample evidence of ritual burning, which includes human remains, at a small platform associated with this group (see chapter 8). This type of material pattern is mainly subscribed to the Puuc area, and in general to the western territories of Late Classic Yucatán (Tiesler 2017a).
Novelo Rincón (2012) demonstrates an accretion of architecture in the Puuc Group, starting with Early Puuc styles and ending in a fine veneer masonry style that he equates with the construction of a *popol na* at Yaxuná, Str. 6F-68. While much of the stone working style at the Puuc Group and 6F-68 looks “Puuc,” as Suhler (1996) notes there is a mix of architectural techniques that are local and nonlocal. Supporting this notion, Novelo Rincón argues that a local style of construction was used to support a Puuc aesthetic. Using the presence of an EPCC at Yaxuná as evidence of a form of direct administration from the Puuc region, Novelo Rincón is inclined to support the idea of a local population whose control switched from Cobá to the Puuc kingdoms around AD 700. This convincing archaeological assessment raises the fundamental question: How did the Puuc realms, perhaps a confederacy of kingdoms, align with the powers of the southern lowlands? It is clear that these kingdoms did practice divine kingship, and no doubt they regarded themselves as peers with southern lowland kings. Did they side with dynastic Tikal and the other enemies of Kaanal? In light of what happens to them in their ensuing contest with Chichén Itzá this seems likely, albeit speculative, but the archaeology of “world war” in the Classic lowlands remains an exciting and challenging enigma. We are confident that Yaxuná will eventually reveal valuable information relevant to such larger questions.

CHICHÉN ITZÁ AND THE CLOSE OF THE CLASSIC ERA

Just like a number of other northern lowland centers, Yaxuná was eclipsed as a regional capital by the growing urban power of Chichén Itzá (chapter 9). Hastily erected defensive walls dated to the ninth century AD were raised around the North Acropolis (Ambrosino et al. 2001). Signs of destruction and selected abandonment deposits characterized by a mix of Sotuta and Cehpech ceramic types have also been reported for this period. Specifically, the intentional destruction of Str. 6F–68 was marked by extensive burning and the entry of a crypt placed beneath one of its floors, an event that will be discussed in chapter 9 of this volume. On that occasion, the cranium and most likely the majority of the grave goods were removed. The arrival of Sotuta ceramics at the site has been interpreted as evidence for an Itzá conquest of Yaxuná (Ambrosino 2007; Ambrosino et al. 2003; Ardren 1999; Suhler and Freidel 1998). The urban core of Yaxuná’s expanding neighbor, Chichén Itzá, experienced substantial construction and population growth already by the mid-ninth century AD, and the iconographic program of the site is more replete with war-related motifs than any other Maya site. Chichén Itzá’s architectural layout is as vast as it is intimidating. We therefore believe that it is more than likely that Yaxuná was incorporated into the new political order at Chichén Itzá by coercive means. Yet just how Chichén Itzá figures into the larger population history of the Maya lowlands remains undetermined and will be one of the themes explored in chapter 9. Beyond doubt, the rulers of this successful city regarded themselves as the rightful successors to the doomed Classic hegemonies further south (Schele and Mathews 1998). In terms of the contest between Kaanal and its Cholan-speaking dynastic adversaries in the south, it
seems likely that the rulers of Chichén Itzá were one more hurrah for the northern proto-
Yucatek-speaking Maya recalling the glory of Kaanal. The retaking of Yaxuná would have
been just another righting of a historically ancient grievance.

Yet what happened after the sacking of Str. 6F-68? From the detailed archaeological
exploration at this building it becomes apparent that this, like many of the civic buildings
at the site, was abandoned and left to fall into permanent ruin. In fact, only a small village
remained in the site core toward the close of the first millennium AD. Str. 6F-9, a small
vaulted building, was constructed off the south side of the North Acropolis. Suhler (1996)
interprets this building as an administrative facility used to manage the remaining popula-
tion at the site. A small number of platforms in the Puuc Group were renovated to be used
as domestic structures at this time, and it is likely that the Maya who stayed at the site were
farmers who may have produced surplus products to feed the growing urban center of the
Itzá (Toscano Hernández and Ortegón Zapata 2003). In fact, surveys conducted by PIPCY
have encountered numerous sites with Sotuta ceramics across the study region, and with the
exceptions of Ik'il, X'togil, and possibly Popolá, all of them appear to have remained pop-
ulated in the form of small hamlets (Stanton and Magnoni 2013). Yet it is quite likely that
Yaxuná, as an ancient crossroads, remained, even in defeat and diminution, a long-known
and therefore viable center.

The regional scenario in and around Yaxuná is complemented by work at other Terminal
Classic satellite settlements of Chichén Itzá. One of these studies includes the analysis of
domestic abandonment processes at the site of Xuenkal, located in the Cupul region corri-
dor to the north of Chichén Itzá, long thought to be controlled by the Itzá to access the port
community of Isla Cerritos (Andrews et al. 1989). Here, Vallejo Cáliz (2011) discovered that
abandonment was a gradual process in residential areas as Sotuta ceramics appeared at the
site. Much like Yaxuná, far fewer people lived at Xuenkal during the apex of Chichén Itzá,
and many of those who chose to stay at the site may have been involved in subsistence activ-
ities and craft production directly linked to the Itzá economy (e.g., Ardren et al. 2010). Yet
regardless of how Xuenkal was brought under Itzá control, this work demonstrates that peo-
ple moved away from competing regional centers, whose monumental cores were allowed
to languish and fall into ruin. Some of these people may have moved to Chichén Itzá itself
to take advantage of more opportune living conditions at the booming metropolis, directly
linked to the new cult revolving around the Feathered Serpent much in the same way that
Teotihuacan began to drain the surrounding regional population in the Basin of Mexico
during the Early Classic (see Sanders et al. 1979). Other families may have chosen or been
forced to move to rural areas in the region or even farther afield, until finally the leadership
structures of competing political centers were completely dismantled and rural areas were
reorganized to create a regional hegemony over the local Maya that served the interests of
the elite of Chichén Itzá. Elite families and artisans throughout the north relocated to this
new urban center (e.g., Vázquez de Ágredos Pascual et al. 2014), as well as many commoners.
Yaxuná’s remnant population would have witnessed this process firsthand as their commu-
nity was being transformed into the agricultural backdrop of Chichén Itzá.
By the end of the Terminal Classic, Yaxuná was abandoned as a habitation site altogether. Peto Cream, the primary ceramic group marking the transition from the Classic to the Postclassic (see Andrews et al. 2003; R. Smith 1971), is markedly absent from the site. While Late Postclassic (AD 1100–1521) materials have been documented in domestic contexts of other sites in the region, including Mopila and at least half a dozen small hamlets (Stanton and Magnoni 2013), there has been no indication of permanent settlement at Yaxuná during this period leading up to the European invasion. Yet there was activity occurring at Yaxuná. Several small Late Postclassic altars were constructed throughout the site. Some of these may have been aimed at memory rituals (Ardren 2003, 2015), while others may have been hunting shrines (Götz and Stanton 2013). At least one individual was interred in Str. 6F-3, probably as an offering. In any event, Yaxuná was a place of ruins during the Late Postclassic.

**EPILOGUE: THE COLONIAL AND POSTCOLONIAL PERIOD**

The Postcontact colonial history of Yaxuná is fragmentary at best (Alexander 2004; Stanton et al. 2010). The region around Yaxunáh (the name of the colonial/modern town on the edge of the archaeological site) was first described by the encomendero (a colonist who was granted use of land and native people to work for him) Juan de Mağaña in January of AD 1581, although he does not mention the archaeological site per se. Larger surrounding Maya communities, namely Sotuta and Yaxcabá, do resonate amply in the Novohispanic records, commonly identified by the Spaniards as areas of fierce native resistance to Novohispanic rule and, by default, with Maya cultural resilience. As the General Archive of the Indies (Escribanía de Cámara 1009B, in Scholes and Adams 1938) documents, natives of both seats were subjected to cruelty and torture by a number of Spanish religious officials in which the Franciscan Bishop Diego de Landa had an active share. He and his inquisitors obtained hundreds of confessions by interrogating previously tortured “witnesses” of “idol” veneration and secretive “heretic” sacrifices of animals and humans, apparently conducted by heart extraction and crucifixion at that time (Scholes and Adams 1938). Other mentions for this area relate to the sudden drop in local population, decimated by hardship, forced labor, hunger, and deadly contagious diseases. Further, these documents relate information concerning forced relocations of Maya families into reducciones (settlements into which the natives were gathered in order to undergo the process of evangelization) at the will of the Spanish Crown, and rebellions that were brutally squashed by well-armed European military.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries AD, the seat of government changed between Yaxcabá (the modern municipal seat) and Sotuta, and for the first half of the seventeenth century, Yaxcabá appears to have had its own parish with secular healers as Franciscans left the area in AD 1586. Yaxunáh itself seems to have been occupied at this point under the administration of Yaxcabá, although control of Yaxunáh appears to have vacillated between Yaxcabá and Sotuta for some time. The church administration did not have
much interest in Yaxunáh itself, and we find few mentions of the community in the historic records.

In the eighteenth century Yaxunáh is mentioned in a record of the visit of Fray Luis de Piña y Mazo to the community in AD 1784. Here, Yaxunáh is described as a small town in a zone of ranches and farms. One of these ranches may be the Hacienda Cetelac, established in the eighteenth century AD as a cattle ranch in the southern portion of the ruins of Yaxuná. Andrews and Robles (1985; see Roys 1933) believe that Cetelac was the ancient name of the archaeological site. With time, Yaxunáh appears to have become a more prominent place of settlement. It is mentioned as one of the haciendas y ranchos del partido (estate and ranch of the political territory) at the beginning of the century, although exact population estimates for the community cannot be discerned from the documents of the seventeenth century. A few decades later, in February of 1815, a census was conducted that estimated the population of Yaxunáh as follows: “en el cual habitan 552 indios, y ningún pardo, español o mestizo” (into which 552 natives live, without the presence of “pardos,” Spaniards and mestizos). The population of Yaxunáh appears to have remained completely Maya at that time and increased in the following years to 1,121 inhabitants based on a census conducted in 1821, although in 1828, the population dropped again to 896 people.

It goes beyond saying that Yaxunáh was seriously affected by the Caste War, which started in 1847 as a revolt of native Yucatecan Maya against the well-to-do segment of mostly European descendants, who had long held political and economic control of the region. The census of Yaxunáh from 1846 still reported 620 inhabitants living in the community, before December 28, 1848, when “el 28 de diciembre (de 1848) desaparecieron, Kancabdzonot, Santa María y Yaxunáh, poblados que fueron asaltados por los insurrectos e incendiados” (on December 28 (1848) the villages of Kancabdzonot, Santa María, and Yaxunáh disappeared. These villages had been assaulted by the insurgents and set to fire), as historian Baqueiro Preve states. Based on this account, Yaxunáh appears to have been abandoned for a time at the beginning of the insurrection. Indeed, one burial from the archaeological site of Yaxuná seems to date to these times of war and hiding, as we discuss in chapter 9. Namely, Suhler (1996) believes that Burial 10 may be a casualty from the Caste War, indicating that the archaeological ruins were used from time to time during this period of strife. It is revealing that the community is not mentioned in any of the censuses conducted in 1900, 1910, and 1921 and may have remained abandoned during this period. Yaxunáh finally reappears in the census documents in 1930 and today is a town of more than 600 people (Stanton et al. 2010). More recently, this traditional Maya community has been subjected heavily to processes of out-migration, primarily to Mérida and the Caribbean coast, and the local economy is currently on subsistence practices and artisan work.