ANCIENT MAYA mortuary assemblages are usually the end results of procuring practices for the dead that are followed by centuries of decay. Most ancient burials materialize ancestral traditions enacted by surviving kin and express shared ideas about death and afterlife coupled with the mourning for a deceased loved one (Duday 2009; Parker Pearson 1999). This may not be the case, however, during times of contingency and crisis. Mortuary treatments also tend to be acted out differently after the ritual immolation of humans. Thinking of the Maya, human sacrifice (or animal sacrifice for that sake) has long been recognized both in the ancient iconography and the archaeological record. Ritual killings tended to be followed by depositional conductS that usually stand scores apart from any of the reverential conductS that we know from the area during pre-Hispanic times (Duncan 2005; Tiesler 2007).

Given the complexity in meanings and conductS that are expressed in both types of human assembleS in the Maya area, their scrutiny allows for extraordinary discussions of mortuary behavior as such and of individual and social concepSions regarding death and afterlife and, therefore, ancient society. Only combined reconstructions and regional compareSion of single and collective mortuary conductS that enable broader discussions on the meanings of the long-standing yet shifting ritual traditioNS in the Maya demonstrated that they were not an exception to other societies.

In this chapter, we document select human assembleS in and around Yaxuná that do not seem to be formally reverential but rather ritually (sensu sacrificiSally) motivated and that have been termed “nonfunerary” in other work (Tiesler 2007). Albeit case studies of repositories for the remains, these glimpses hold promise for a broader understanding of the choreographies of ritual immolations of humans in the Yucatán Peninsula—namely, those of what once were likely ritually slaughtered victims and their posthumous processing in the form of cremation, reduction, and relic taking (tables 8.1 and 8.2). Note that the nonfunerary
**Table 8.1.** Perimortem and postmortem anthropogenic marks in human remains, as discussed in the text.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACTION</th>
<th>ABBR.</th>
<th>SKELETAL SIGNATURE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Slicing</td>
<td>CS</td>
<td>Thin and mostly superficial slicing marks on bone surfaces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharp Force Trauma</td>
<td>CE</td>
<td>Deep cut-marks on bone surfaces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bone Section</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>Sectioning of bone by abrasion or sharp instruments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polish</td>
<td>PU</td>
<td>Wearing off and flattening of bone surface by abrading with soft or hard material</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect Fire Exposure</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>Reddish coloration (&lt;300°C)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Fire Exposure (300–500 °C)</td>
<td>NE</td>
<td>Charring (black tone)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate Fire Exposure (500–600 °C)</td>
<td>GR</td>
<td>Light brown or gray tone (500–600°C)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Fire Exposure (&gt;600 °C)</td>
<td>AZ, BL</td>
<td>White, blue tones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heating of Green Bone</td>
<td>WA</td>
<td>Transverse, convex, and conical fissures (<em>warping</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heating of Green Bone</td>
<td>ESTR</td>
<td>Stratigraphy of colors (<em>sandwiching</em>)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 8.2.** Chronological ranges assigned to the sacrificial deposits at Yaxuná, discussed in this chapter and updated from Stanton et al. (2010).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BURIAL NUMBER</th>
<th>PHASE</th>
<th>GRAVE ARCHITECTURE</th>
<th>POSITION</th>
<th>DECUBITUS</th>
<th>ORIENTED</th>
<th>ARTICULATION</th>
<th>NUMBER OF INDIVIDUALS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Burial 22</td>
<td>Yaxuná III (AD 500–700)</td>
<td>Simple Pit</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burial 26 (Skull)</td>
<td>Yaxuná III (AD 500–700)</td>
<td>Simple Pit</td>
<td>Extended</td>
<td>Dorsal</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burial 27 (2011) (27-1)</td>
<td>Yaxuná III (AD 500–700)</td>
<td>Simple Pit</td>
<td>Flexed</td>
<td>Ventral</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burial 27 (Cr. 1, 2011) (27-2)</td>
<td>Yaxuná III (AD 500–700)</td>
<td>Simple Pit</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
repositories discussed here complement our documentation those from the two tomb chamber contexts, already described in chapter 7.

The subsequent paragraphs will follow up on the general depositional trends according to chronological assignments of clearly nonfunerary deposits and those who have a potentially ritual character, using the project classification, which bridges the Early Classic tomb burials described in chapter 7 with the diverse Late and Terminal Classic deposits. For the purposes of this study, we have scrutinized the burial profiles and analyzed all surfaces of our local skeletal collection systematically for anthropogenic marks, inflicted ante-, peri-, or postmortem, following Pijoan Aguadé and Mansilla (1997), Schmidt and Symes (2008), Turner and Turner (1999), and White (1992) (table 8.1). These attributes include sharp and blunt force trauma, slicing and sectioning, different types of bone breakage, and heat exposure. The state of preservation and completeness of each skeletal individual was determined according to anatomical segment and overall presence. In a second approach, we documented isolated human segments and commingled remains, which are prominently represented in a rock-shelter associated with the North Acropolis.

**CONSUMPTION OF BODIES BY RITUAL FIRE**

The first human assemblage from Yaxuná under discussion, Burial 22 from Str. 6F-12 (figure 8.1a), is a complete cremation of a single individual that was deposited at the bottom of a round, delineated pit, measuring 1.20 m in diameter in the center of a low square platform located in the plaza just to the south of the North Acropolis. In fact, this structure is located on the axis of an open plaza connecting the North Acropolis and the ballcourt. Because of its peculiar location in the center of an open space and its morphology, this context had been originally described as a sweatbath by Dave Johnstone, the excavator (Stanton et al. 2010; figure 8.1b). However, more recent scrutiny has pointed against this interpretation given the lack of material evidence to characterize this assemblage as such. The platform and the ballcourt date to Yaxuná IVa.

The Yaxuná context has parallels in a small number of other sites across the Maya lowlands, where cremains have been found in low platforms located in the central areas of plazas. Such is the case of a double cremation from the Plaza of the Seven Temples, several single cremains from Tikal (Chinchilla Mazariegos et al. 2015; see also Coggins 1975, 1979; figure 8.2), and one completely scorched multiple from the Central Acropolis of Caracol (A. F. Chase and D. Z. Chase 2011). In these cases, the bodies had been burned on pyres in a fleshy state above a pit excavated for this purpose in a ritually significant, liminal location. After the act, the cremated remains were then left on the spot and the pit was filled in. These contexts are similar in that they align with triadic groups (principally E-Group complexes) and that they are situated right in the core of monumental districts.

In the case of Yaxuná, the badly weathered and burnt remains belonged to a young man who had barely reached maturity. The taphonomic signature from his skeleton is a showcase
FIGURE 8.1. (a) Location of Burial and sacrificial deposits around the North Acropolis at Yaxúná; (b) East-West section of Burial 22, Yaxúná, showing the stucco lined pit on the left (Yaxúná Project, Selz Foundation).
for flesht cremation at a high temperature (above 500º C) (plate 8.1). In preparation for the bonfire, the walls of the prepared pit in the platform had most likely been covered loosely with *sascab* and the pit filled with combustible matter (Stanton et al. 2010; Tiesler 2016; Tiesler et al. 2015). The dimensions of the pit deposit, together with the presence of a massive volume of charcoal, ashes, and cremation slag, suggest that the body was burned at high temperatures in this pit until it was reduced to disarticulated bone scraps and ashes before the pit was filled in again and sealed with a subsequent floor (figure 8.1b).

The deposit looks suspiciously like the sacrificial remains of a calendrical ritual. Any conclusive identification of the ritual occasion with *k'atun*’ or New Year renovation ceremonies, however, remains elusive due to a lack of more compelling evidence in this specific case and the fact that many rulers utilized ideologically charged dates to reinforce their claims to authority. Regardless, the axial location in the center of an open court, and the fact that a body was consumed completely on a pyre without proper reburial, does recall the firing

**FIGURE 8.2.** Similarly sized, still partially articulated double cremation burial from Early Classic Tikal from the center of the Plaza of the Seven Temples and east of its E-group (PP7TT, IDAEH, Parque Tikal, Guatemala).
techniques and inferred ritual choreographies discussed in other bioarchaeological works for Tikal and Caracol and links the Yaxuná case to a larger tradition on a wider regional scale. Further, scenes that are reminiscent of the body treatment that may have led to Burial 22 are depicted in a number of sacrificial scaffold scenes painted on Maya polychromes or carved into stone monuments (Taube 1988). Particularly grisly to our eyes is one scene carved into Tikal’s Altar 9. On the top of the scene, flames collapse over the overextended body of a still living captive while he is suspended from the top with cordage. This and additional analogous scenes hint at the utilization of scaffolds in firing human bodies and could have been used also in the cremation of the individual from Burial 22 at Yaxuná. Beyond doubt, these were major festive occasions, their performance pertaining to the religious and political elites of kingdoms. In these ritual choreographies, cremation deaths were important elements, as they evoked central cosmogonic myths of the Maya that were triggered by fire transformation (Tiesler 2017a).

In terms of fiery body consumption, Yucatán is not an exception, although the broader regional imagery depicts not so much the burning bodies on scaffolds but shows the victims draped over burners (Graña-Behrens and Tiesler 2017; Tiesler 2017a). Late and Terminal Classic monumental sculpture in particular display such evocative sacrificial scenes. For instance, such imagery has been noted from the Building of the Sculpted Columns at Xculoc as well as from Tohco in Campeche (figure 8.3). The latter shows a sacrificial ceremony that had been painted on a doorjamb from the site’s epicenter and is dated to the Late or Terminal Classic (Graña-Behrens 2002). This scene shows a dancing priest in jaguar attire bearing solar markings, while a child is being offered on a spiked censer. Smoke rises behind the ajaw sign and two wooden bundles, while the youngster is consumed by flames and smoke, pointing toward calendrical consecration. Another example comes from the Puuc site Techoh, near Ouxkutzcab, and has been described only spuriously in the literature, probably also due to its severe weathering. In this case, the spiked censer is depicted on a columnar altar dated to the Late or Terminal Classic. It carries what we believe is a child with flames emerging from its top (Graña-Behrens and Tiesler 2017; see also García Campillo 1995; Riese and Mayer 1987).

This type of ceremony must have continued past the collapse, as a burning ritual reminiscent of the above scenes appears on the so-called Tenoned Disc from Chichén Itzá. This round carved stone was recovered directly from the Caracol architectural complex. In this case, either a clay figure or a real body is dropped directly into a burning brazier, possibly as part of a scattering ceremony (Graña-Behrens and Tiesler 2017). The inscription refers to the title ajaw and provides a specific date of AD 930.

BODY BUNDLES IN YAXUNÁ’S SACRED SPACES

The ancient Maya believed in sacred spaces and held them to be thresholds that would catalyze communication and exchange with otherworldly powers. Subterranean passages were
considered such a liminal space between the living and the dead and were therefore used as ritual depositories for the divine, including human disposal. From this perspective, the exploration and interpretation of human remains from natural geological cavities provide invaluable points of departure to understand Maya cosmology, ritual, and sacrifice. Due to the complexities involved in their interpretation, controversy has dominated the discussions about the origins of human cave deposits ever since Ruz’s landmark survey of Maya mortuary customs (1991; see also Ruz Lhuillier 1965). The unusual and sporadic mortuary use of caves and crevices has been emphasized, along with their diverse and in some ways distinctive roles from most residential repositories. Recent scholarship (e.g., Cucina et al. 2015; Lucero and Gibbs 2007; Saul et al. 2005; Scott and Brady 2005; Wrobel et al. 2014) has emphasized the need to treat centrally located, urban cave burials as conceptually distinctive from those embedded in the inaccessible rural landscapes. The former are more readily attributable to centrally conducted sacrificial and postsacrificial discard, given their proximity to the seats of dynastic power (Cucina and Tiesler 2014; Palomo 2007).

**FIGURE 8.3.** (a) Painting on inner side of doorslab, Tohcoc, Campeche (Graña-Behrens 2002). Note that smoke rises behind the ajaw sign and two wooden bundles (from Proskouriakoff 1965:figure 13.b); (b) spiked censer, displayed on a columnar altar from Techoh, Yucatán, displaying the burning of a body while priest stands by (on exhibit in the Regional Museum of Dzibilchaltún, INAH; drawing by B. Ceballos).
This interpretive lens is particularly relevant in the case of a collapsed cave associated with the North Acropolis. This area, now only a rock-shelter, had been used as a ritual repository for over a thousand years (Marengo Camacho 2013; Stanton and Marengo Camacho 2014). Recent excavations by PIPCY have revealed that a large depression documented on a basal platform of the North Acropolis resulted after the collapse of a cave, over and around which the North Acropolis had been constructed during the Formative period. Sometime during the Early Classic, this cave began to collapse and the depression was used as a trash pit, containing copious amounts of ceramic, lithic, malacological, faunal, and human remains.

In 2011, excavations of the area still protected by the rock-shelter led to the discovery of the intact skeletal remains of what had been introduced as a bundled body. It appeared in a homogeneous sandy layer some 210 cm below the collapsed roof just to the north and 120 cm above the bottom of the cave deposit. During initial explorations, only the articulated lower legs with their feet were exposed, the elements closest to the surface. Yet upon further exposure by the UADY team, it became apparent that these bones were only part of a complete, tightly flexed skeleton, which in life had belonged to a young adult male. The extraordinary state of preservation in which we found the bones was probably due to the lack of vegetation and the dense, regular, and dry quality of the embedding soil protected by the overhang (figures 8.4 and 8.5).

This unique mortuary assemblage had been interred in the midst of an extensive matrix of broken ceramics, faunal remains, and burnt and broken human bones, although no proper grave goods were made out to have accompanied the individual in death. Small segments pertaining to Burial 27 itself, such as a rib fragment, carpal bones, and phalanges, laid interspersed with other trash remains in the larger context. In all cases the dispersed fragments of trash encroached on the burial, indicating frequent disturbances of the soil accruing on top of this primary deposit; most likely such disturbances were due to subsequent human activity during the course of the following centuries. Yet the skeleton remained very well articulated, suggesting that there was an intentional avoidance of the context and that there was a collective memory of the burial (plates 8.2 and 8.3). In spatial proximity to Burial 27 was an isolated skull of one other individual, which will be described in the subsequent section of this chapter. As we believe from the contextual and ceramic associations, this burial dates to the Late Classic period.

Burial 27 is quite unusual in its form. The individual had been squeezed prone into a reduced rectangular hollow. This pit should have measured not more than 40 cm on its north-south axis and only 70 cm in its perpendicular direction. The original excavation of this mortuary context must have been accomplished in such a way that the back of the corpse closed the deposit horizontally tightly on top, making a sort of geometric, rectangular outline, which we still recognized clearly in the skeletonized body arrangement. This “boxed” human cache was laid out on an east-west axis, with the buttocks to the east and the neck facing west, while the face itself “looked” upward from below the left second or third rib.

All skeletal segments, except for the above-mentioned peripheral and upper parts (such as the left rib cage), showed to be tightly articulated, signaling instant filling of the body's
decompositional volume with soil, which would gradually percolate and substitute the voids formerly occupied by the soft tissues (plates 8.2 and 8.3, and figure 8.6). During the decompositional process the skeletonizing trunk sank down, resulting in the shoulders resting beneath the level of the feet. On the other side of the rectangular pit, the remains did not suffer any change in position due to their lack of bland parts. These data suggest that the pit’s depth should have measured originally some 10 cm less here than at the proximal end.

The tibial shins came to rest directly on the bottom of the pit with both feet rotated medially. This way, the distal part of the left foot came to rest on top of the distal portion of the right
one. The arms had been crossed in front of the abdomen, the legs completely flexed toward the sides of the trunk (plates 8.2 and 8.3, figure 8.6). The trunk itself had rotated slightly toward the right, probably as a result of the volumetric displacement caused by the head on the left side, still in a fleshted state. Revealingly, it was the neck and not the head that touched the edge of the pit. The head itself had been lowered beneath the left shoulder and pulled down to force it into the chest cavity beneath the second or third left rib. After a thousand years of being in earth, upon excavation, the face of the young man seemed to “look” up to us unnaturally from beneath the left scapula. His orbits touched the shoulder blades from beneath. Note that this forceful throat extension and head twist does not appear to have caused any fracture in any cervical vertebra, but was associated at least with green-bone fractures in at least one left thoracic vertebral apophysis and two rib necks, as we shall discuss below (figure 8.7). The thoracic girdle deserves separate attention in our taphonomic discussion. Only the right ribs were articulated with their corresponding vertebral necks, whereas the left rib cage showed disturbances and disarticulation from the fifth segment downward—namely, the fifth rib showed complete disturbance, just like the sixth, the seventh, and the eighth ribs. The seventh segment displayed complete rotation out of its expected space of articulation with the vertebral column. Only the lowest left ribs showed to articulate with the vertebral spine again.

With this taphonomic scenario, we can hypothetically reconstruct the following sequence in primary deposition. It seems that the young occupant of the tight rectangular
mortuary repository had been accommodated, tied, and flexed, with the head on the chest. The state of articulation argues against any use of sturdy matting or cloth for bundling the corpse (which would have caused disruption in the filling in of voids and therefore resulted in a less articulated distribution of skeletal segments).

The information from the field was supplemented by the lab analysis, furthering our understanding of these remains. The individual was confirmed as male, using current macroscopic indications as described in chapters 2 and 3. The age range was 20 to 22 at the time of death, with some few epiphyses still open or in the process of closure. No visible signs of antemortem (and therefore healed) trauma were noted, except for a deviated nasal root. Regarding infectious disease, the remains display evidence for chronic, ongoing systemic disorders caused by infectious disease. This condition led to numerous large lithic resorptions inside the thoracic and lumbar vertebral bodies with nodular inflammatory remodeling.
**FIGURE 8.7.** (a) Middle and lower thoracic vertebrae of Burial 27-1, showing extensive, chronic, although localized lithic resorption on most vertebral bodies; (b) left rib of Burial 27-1, which displays unhealed tear of rib neck; (c) sharp-force trauma in green bone on body (PIPCY/Bioarchaeology and Histology Laboratory, UADY).
along the pleural surfaces of the ribs, with hemorrhagic components in the corresponding rib necks (figure 8.7). While the pathologies should have caused incipient spinal deformation, the disease should have caused chronic discomfort and supurative reaction in the individual when still alive, particularly in the airways. Considered jointly in terms of morphology and anatomical topography, the changes manifest an ongoing infectious, inflammatory reaction, which the literature identifies with specific osteomyelitis, probably related to endemic and advanced brucelosis, and less so, equinococo, tuberculosis, or micosis (Aufderheide and Rodríguez-Martín 1998; Ortner 2003). This rare condition has been documented in various reverential burials and specifically sacrificial assemblages across the peninsula, such as two primary deposits from Champotón and Becán (Tiesler 2007).

The skeletal remains of Burial 27 were systematically scrutinized for peri- and postmortem marks. Several ribs showed perimortem trauma in the form of laceration, spiral fractures, and sharp force trauma in green bone (figure 8.8). The latter mark damaged the fourth left rib, which displays a blow from the front to the neck of the rib. The cortical edges are straight and regular, while the dorsal spongy and cortical volume shows a rougher surface, indicating that the stab wound was inflicted from the front and hit the back of the spine. The tonality is not lighter that the bone surface, which indicates that the condition is not recent, just as the orientation and direction of the fissure seem to indicate. Likewise, the eighth left rib shows evidence of at least two lacerations at the height of the rib neck and the midshaft area. Also these marks were inflicted in a fresh, probably fleshed state. The tension fracture was probably caused by a vehement outward torsion of the segment.

When we take into account the taphonomy reconstructed for Burial 27 (we recall especially the loss of articulation in the left rib cage), the documented rib lesions appear to signal the violent opening of this part of the thoracic cage, perhaps for sacrificial heart extraction, probably followed posthumously by the forceful introduction of the head (still attached to the neck) into the hollow. It is noteworthy in this respect that we did not encounter any rib segments between the face and the left scapular surface. Regardless, this mortuary treatment is the first one of its kind described for the area. The tied and packaged character of the individual certainly evokes hunting rituals, involving white-tailed deer and wild fauna in the Maya area and beyond, as we have described in chapter 4 of this volume.

Although the current evidence would render any more definite assertions for this specific individual speculative, scholarship on Mesoamerican religiosity (see, for example, Olivier 2015) goes at lengths to assign hunting rituals with deeper meaning of feeding the gods by offering faunal essences or segments in the form of aromas, clouds, or in a raw, rather than boiled or cooked, state. In the metaphorical and reciprocal native cosmology, these ceremonies could include humans. It is significant to recall that, for this liminal deposit and the ceremony that surely preceded it, a terminally diseased young man would be chosen, one who suffered from a rare “cold” and “watery disease” of what brucellosis would have represented in proper native conception. This brings to mind a further, similarly aged male from the large settlement of Becán, further south in Campeche (Tiesler and Campaña 2006). Like Burial 27-1, this youngster had suffered from this rare chronic infection before being killed by heart extraction and being bundled and left on the lower staircase of a buried substructure.
RITUAL DEPOSITS OF BODY PARTS AT YAXUNÁ

Apart from the intact individual labeled Burial 27-1, a massive amount of large and well-preserved ceramic sherds and bony vestiges was deposited in the subterranean passage beneath Yaxuña’s North Acropolis. Many isolated human bones were among the material deposits recovered in the volume of the cave fill. Albeit some were well preserved, the majority showed a highly weathered and fragmented quality. Some of the bones displayed clear signs of direct burning. The diverse taphonomic nature of these segments (including two skulls and a mandible) indicates that most remains had undergone diverse and in part extensive posthumous treatments even before they entered the trash deposit. Numbered according to sector and layer, these bone scraps included teeth (Sector 2.1-no. 1), adult phalanges (Sector 3.1-no. 2, 3; Sector 3.4-no. 13), mandibles (Sector 3.3-no. 7), fire-exposed skulls (Sector 3.3-no. 8; Sector 3.4-no. 9, 14; Sector 3.5-no. 14; see also next section), ribs (Sector 3.4-no. 11, 13),

FIGURE 8.8. Anatomic reconstruction drawing of the burial disposition of B27-1, showing (a) tight flexion of lower extremities and a displaced left rib cage; (b) close-up reconstruction drawing of lower layer. The overextended and sharply twisted neck of the individual, with head “looking” upward through the displaced thorax (PIPCY; drawings by Érika Meijide Jansen). The body is shown emaciated from terminal chronic brucellosis; the skin of the legs is rendered spotty due to diffuse hemorrhages.
and humeri (Sector 3.4-no. 10). The complete crania exhibited cut-marks around the occipital and the frontal area. Despite the unusual position and placement of Burial 27 (being the only complete individual in the deposit and in conjunction with the postmortem treatment of the other human remains), the burned and broken bones encountered in this context may reflect the mortuary treatment of people from Yaxuná who were not interred in formal crypts and tombs and suggests that this trash pit may have been the final resting place for people killed during institutionalized violence and specifically during religious enactment. The joint evidence suggests that the depression was used as a deposit of ceremonial trash during the latter portion of the Classic (Marengo Camacho 2013, Stanton and Marengo Camacho 2014; Tiesler et al. 2012). In the following section we will specifically refer to two intact cranial deposits, along with an additional one interred right outside the overhang (table 8.2).

**BURIAL 27-2**

The skull was found at a depth of one meter, within Level 2, where it was found leaning against the inner wall of the rock-shelter, facing east (figure 8.9). Two meters separated this deposit from Burial 27-1. Material and stratigraphic associations indicate a Late Classic chronology for the well-preserved cranial deposit. The skull lacked a mandible and vertebras, suggesting it had been carried inside already in a skeletonized state. The piece itself lacked its left zygomatic arch and ten mostly frontal maxillary teeth, all of which are held in the socket by conic roots; this feature makes it very easy for the teeth to fall out of their socket in dry bone and get lost. All the above suggests handling, maybe transportation prior to its final deposition, perhaps as part of relic taking or protracted postsacrificial treatment.

We documented several other human bone scraps in the immediacies of this skull. However, none of those appears to belong to this individual. The state of preservation and tone of what was labeled subsequently Deposit 27-Cr. 1 was exceptionally good just like the preservation of Burial 27. Whitish spots intercalated with a shiny, light-brownish bone surface, potentially pointing to prior boiling, although this point cannot be assured with certainty. Lab scrutiny identified these remains as belonging to an adolescent of 13 to 17 years of age who was likely female in life (see description in chapters 3 and 5). Some of the noticeable biographic features of this skull were the foreign origin of the individual (likely from central or western Peten, see analysis in chapters 2 and 5) and her extreme head elongation and reclination, aligning with the beauty ideal of Western Ch’olan populations during the first millennium AD.

Without the postcranium, we can only speculate about the living conditions of this youngster. However, severe, healed hyperostosis (as described in chapter 4) points to a deficient food intake or absorption during childhood in the form of vitamin C deficiency (possibly scurvy), which had a debilitating effect on the connective tissue and recurrent bleeding.

Regarding cultural, anthropogenic marks, we did not document any signs of perimortem violence, but scored a number of probably intentional slicings in the peripheral area of the orbits and crossing over the frontal crests of both sides, which make us believe that this individual could have been flayed prior to skeletalization. As stated above, we do not rule
out boiling as a form of postmortem preparation, given the patches of discoloration and the peculiar shiny surface we observed. Taken together, the attributes of Burial 27-2 point to the preparation, curation, and final deposition into a liminal space of a foreign-born youngster with extreme physical attributes. We cannot assure her sacrificial status with the evidence at hand, but the combined signatures make this scenario quite probable (see Tiesler 2007).

**BURIAL 26**

Much less preserved than the skull Burial 27-2 was what the Selz Foundation termed Burial 26 in 1995. This single, deteriorated skull was recovered in the trash deposit just outside of the protected rock-shelter. Dated insecurely to Yaxuná’s phase IVa–IVb (associated Cehpech/Sotuta ceramics) given its proximity to the disturbed surface of the deposit, this cranium belonged to an adult individual who was likely male, considering the degree of robusticity and size of the segments that integrated the skull without its mandible, just like the afore-described context. Prior to deposition, this piece had been exposed to low heat, leaving areas of superficial carbonization on two of its segments—namely, the ethmoid and the malar bones. The stratification of the color changes and the spotty distribution of the darkening seem to indicate an exposure in a fleshed state.

Apart from heat exposure, several slicing marks, performed by a repeated action of cutting with obsidian or chert tools, were noted. These cut-marks cross over the inial area of the
occipital bone and were probably motivated by separating the nucal musculature from the still fleshed back of the head. Showing signs of heat exposure, it appears that the skull had been either separated from the trunk posthumously or by decapitation, to be subsequently burned, maybe as part of a censer ceremony held during a ceremonial occasion and as part of postsacificial rites, as we have described along the opening pages of this chapter. Of course, we cannot, and do not, rule out alternative explanations tied to an ancestrally motivated choreography. However, the lack of offerings and the public location of the human context would speak against any reverential funerary practice.

A myriad of head interments or previously defleshed skull deposits have also been noted during explorations of other Maya settlement and specifically in peninsular assemblages (Andrews and Andrews 1980; Medina Martín and Sánchez Vargas 2007; Tiesler 2002; Weiss-Krejci 2006). They appear either in association with the articulated corpses (especially between plates) or were placed as seemingly isolated offerings in the monumental core area of cities. Many of the individuals to whom they once belonged appear to be foreigners, as acknowledged by their isotopic profiles (see for example Tiesler et al. 2010b).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As this and the previous chapters of this section demonstrate, it is only this detailed level of reconstructions of mortuary pathways that sets the stage for a broader discussion on singular versus unified behavioral components or for inferring long-standing, culturally embedded, conservative trends versus social change and crisis. This holds especially true for ritual body processing involving human bodies. This chapter has explored the breadth of body treatments at the site following ritual killings or likely ritual slaughter. These appear to stand apart from the shifting local and regional ancestral practices in and around the site. As in other urban Maya centers, the case studies documented here highlight the use of sacred, liminal spaces or axial spots in central temple areas; posthumous body manipulation in the form of cremation, reduction, flaying, and relic taking was probably part of many ritual enactments that preceded the assemblage formations described here.

Also, social disruption is prone to be expressed in shifts or contingencies in burial practices, expressed in the material record by massive replacements or discontinuities in terms of mortuary repertoire. This has become clear after our discussion of the multiple Burial 24 assemblage. This simultaneous primary multiple was most probably a staged tableau macabre of forced cycling of the terminated elite with their retainers. It is probably no coincidence that most of the truly “deviant” burials (as defined by Murphy 2008)—confirmed simultaneous multiples in the Maya record, irregular positioning, sealed deposits of charred bones, or fleshed mutilated bodies and segments—date to the liminal years of reoccupation, abandonment, war, and destruction during the centuries surrounding the political and social replacement at the end of key periods in the northern lowlands.