Before Kukulkán

Tiesler, Vera, Cucina, Andrea, Stanton, Travis W., Freidel, David, Ardren, Traci

Published by University of Arizona Press

Tiesler, Vera, et al.
Before Kukulkán: Bioarchaeology of Maya Life, Death, and Identity at Classic Period Yaxuná.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/56804

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2047584
INTRODUCTION

As we have learned over the course of this book, Yaxuná's population has a long and complex trajectory, stretching back to the dawn of Maya civilization. In this chapter we shall sum up what the archaeological and especially the mortuary and human record of Yaxuná inform about the city's internal development and regional engagements before its final decline and demise. As with many cities across the lowlands (Culbert 1973; Demarest et al. 2004), Yaxuná experienced a drastic decline and eventual abandonment during the Terminal Classic Maya collapse. This abandonment, however, while intrinsically tied to regional social processes occurring across the cultural landscapes, shows a peculiar course of events given the settlement’s day-walking distance (approximately 18 km) to Chichén Itzá, one of the most important and enigmatic urban centers in the later history of ancient Mesoamerica.

Beyond doubt, although originally triggered by the tumult generated among the large polities to the south of the peninsula, the close of the Classic period was also a time of great social turbulence in Yucatán and at Yaxuná. While the role of Chichén Itzá in the wider processes surrounding this upheaval is not well understood, it is clear that the rise of this city was directly related to the decline and eventual abandonment of Yaxuná. This chapter closes by discussing the bioarchaeology of the unprecedented forms of Maya urbanism and multiculturalism at the verge of the second millennium AD in the central northern lowlands.

FRAMING THE TRAJECTORY OF YAXUNÁ’S PEOPLE

We have a tremendous amount of data from Formative period Yaxuná (Stanton 2000, 2005a, 2012, n.d.a; Stanton and Ardren 2005; Stanton and Collins, n.d.a, n.d.b; Stanton et al. 2010; Suhler 1996; Suhler et al. 1998a). As discussed in more detail in chapter 1, it is the earliest
known settlement in the region dating back to at least 900 BC. As the community grew over the first few centuries of occupation, a regional polity coalesced around it by the beginning of the first millennium AD. Yaxuná was a thriving regional capital whose architectural traditions were very much inside the canons of Petén. Unfortunately, we have absolutely no skeletal data from this early span of time, which in reality covers more than half of the chronology of pre-Hispanic Maya occupation of the region. Despite excavations in the types of public and monumental spaces where human remains have been recovered by other projects working on the Formative, such as the E-Group complex and various triadic acropolis groups (5E-19, North Acropolis, East Acropolis) as well as in numerous domestic platforms specifically dating to the Late Formative (see Stanton and Magnoni 2016; Stanton et al. 2010), no human remains have been recovered. Granted, many of the domestic platforms have been tremendously altered by later Classic period activity that may have destroyed the early human remains or moved them to secondary contexts that we have not yet been able to identify. However, the possibility remains that early human burial practices differed at Yaxuná and the dead were placed less often in these types of contexts. Only further research will shed more light on these possibilities.

Human remains have been recovered from Formative contexts in other areas of the northern lowlands (e.g., Hernández Hernández and Arias 2003). Such is the case of the large site of Dzibilchaltún, which had already emerged as an important settlement by the Middle Formative. It was extensively excavated during the second half of the last century by the Middle American Research Institute (MARI) (Andrews and Andrews 1980). The 27 Formative period burials from this site are associated mainly to its El Mirador group, and most of them are aligned along the east-west axis. Only one of these assemblages had been formally lined with stones as a tomb. The others were simple interments, some with inverted plates over the cranial area, others without. Infants were placed in ceramic vessels. In this sense the Formative period burial record from Dzibilchaltún anticipates the commoner funerary customs in the region in the centuries to come.

Tiesler (2010, 2014) has documented Formative period cranial modifications in the Dzibilchaltún material. One specimen, dated to the Xculul phase (50 BC–AD 250), displays a pear-shaped, Olmecoid cranial modification, a peculiar form identified with the Maya Maize God and first described by Arturo Romano in a Middle Formative site from Chiapas (Romano 1980; see also Taube 1996); this form has not been reported in Yucatán past the onset of the Classic period.

Recent excavations led by Fernando Robles at Caucel, in the western periphery of modern-day Mérida, has also revealed Formative period burial remains, among which two, once again, display a narrow and high cranial vault just as the example described above (Tiesler 2010). The simple burials are associated with Dzudzuquil Group ceramics, which ties them to the Early Nabanché phase (800/700–400/300 BC). The preliminary results from the work at Caucel indicate that this large settlement had ties to the north coast and was primarily occupied during the Middle Formative; occupation, however, continued through the Late Classic (Robles and Ligorred 2008; see also Andrews and Robles 2008). The fact that human
remains have been found in Formative period contexts at these, and other, sites brings us back to our earlier thoughts on the missing burial population from Yaxuná's early occupation; the Dzibilchaltún and Caucel examples may provide feasible scenarios for burial traditions and head shapes for Yaxuná's early inhabitants, although this remains speculative at this time.

Just as early remains are uncommon in Yucatán and have been cursorily reported, representations of humans are also sparse in the northern Maya lowlands during this early time. Apart from the petroglyph of the image of a Late Formative ruler at the cave of Loltún (Freidel and Andrews, n.d.) and some possible cave rock art dating to the Formative at some other sites (e.g., Barrera and Peraza Lope 1999; Slater 2014a, although the dating of this art is far from secure), the only depictions of anthropomorphic figures come from large stucco deity mask programs (e.g., Quintal 1999; Quintal and Rodríguez 2006) or portable greenstone figures (e.g., Rathje et al. 1973) that do not give us much of an idea of either the social or biological skin of the early Maya of this region.

At Yaxuná itself we do not currently have much of any data along any of these lines (see Freidel and Suhler 1995) before the first evidence of human remains, represented by the dynast buried in the Burial 23 tomb chamber in the North Acropolis. As the Early Classic was ushered in, we begin to get a better, albeit still vague, sense of the people of Yaxuná themselves. A small amount of iconography is available from this period (Brainerd 1958; Suhler 1996), as well as the skeletonized remains of 13 individuals. Unfortunately, all of the documented skeletons come from two royal tombs and do not represent a cross-section of the site population at large. While we can possibly explain the lack of nonelite burials the same way we did for the Formative period (i.e., massive destruction of early residential structures through a processes of renovations during the Late and Terminal Classic and/or a local practice of disposing the dead that did not result in many bodies buried in residential architecture, the former being the most likely of the two possibilities in our opinion), finding evidence of settlement during the Early Classic has been a challenge (Stanton 2000). In fact, in contrast to Late Formative settlement that, despite being heavily disturbed, has been extensively identified throughout the site through a program of test pits and surface collections, few clearly Early Classic structures have been reported by the several projects that have worked at the site.

One explanation of this problem may lie with difficulties in the ceramic chronology of the site (see Johnstone 2001; Suhler et al. 1998b). The Early Classic has been traditionally identified at Yaxuná through the use of ceramic markers from the Xanabá and Dos Arroyos groups, as well Petén Gloss wares (see Johnstone 2001 for a breakdown of Yaxuná II into various phases). The problem with the Xanabá group is that, as Ceballos and Robles (2012) point out, Xanabá Red extends some distance back into the Formative period and, as Gómez García (2012) notes, the Flaky Ware tradition to which Xanabá pertains endures through the Late Classic. Thus, it is not a good chronological marker of the Early Classic. The Dos Arroyos polychromes, as well as the Petén Gloss wares, are good markers but are not found in sufficient amounts at the site to be tremendously useful for dating in settlement survey. Further complicating the matter, as A. F. Chase and D. Z. Chase (2005) point out, Formative ceramic types such as Sierra Red extend into the Early Classic, blurring the lines between
these periods and making Early Classic settlement more difficult to identify. To add to this problem, our current work on the ceramic chronology, such as Maxcanú Buff, indicates that some ceramic types thought to pertain to the Late Classic also extend back into the Early Classic, a situation also noted at the site of Oxkintok, where Varela Torrecilla (1998) established a Middle Classic period. Thus, although there has been discussion of a reduction of population at Yaxúná as a consequence of a possible Formative demographic collapse (Glover and Stanton 2010), an event that has been proposed for other areas of the lowlands (see Ball 1978; Grube 1995; Hansen et al. 2002; Tourtellot 1988) and that we still believe the data support, there may be also a chronological issue here.

Our recent research on the settlement and its chronology, however, does not support the idea that the Early Classic period settlement cannot be distinguished well from other chronological periods. Radiocarbon essays in secure contexts from the 5E-50 Group and the identification of a number of large platforms with Early Classic components in the areas surrounding this group indicate that in the area just south of the E-Group complex stood a number of residences dating to this period. This may indicate that there was indeed a population decrease, possibly contributing to the lack of residential burials in our sample.

In any event, what we know about the Early Classic at Yaxúná comes from strictly high-status contexts. These, by themselves, are revealing in that they showcase the varied political uses of funerary ritual, during times of both stability and substitution, just as chapter 7 demonstrates. The accommodation of Burial 23 and its lavish accoutrement is rich in material and manufacture, but it held a highly symbolic value that we have tied to solar deities and the vitality of maize, to dynastic self-sacrifice and final ancestral apotheosis. As demonstrated, the bed of scorched hearth stones that were allocated around the skeletonized corpse of the paramount together with the ashes appear to generate a cosmic hearth. In its center rests the upper part of the deceased royal, creating a vertical axis with the universe above.

A human “cosmogram” of a different kind is projected by Burial 24, a simultaneous multiple coined tableau macabre by David Freidel. Its setup integrates a female and a male triad of tied and seated corpses, accompanied by several young human containers, tossed at one end of the tomb from the void above. As we have argued from the material evidence, the simultaneous placement of exquisitely attired corpses, some of which show marks of perimortem violence, argues for an abrupt end of rule (and indeed the ruling pedigree) and most probably a replacement by other contenders to maximum authority.

POLITICAL CHAOS AND REVITALIZATION DURING THE TERMINAL CLASSIC

Relatively soon after the murder of the royal family at Yaxúná during the Early Classic, the city entered an era when it is difficult to well understand what happens to its residents. We assume that some degree of control over the settlement by the perpetrators of this act lasted for a time, but it is not until the causeway that connects Yaxúná to the great Late Classic metropolis of Cobá sometime during the seventh century AD that we get a better sense of
Yaxuná’s political history again. It is during this period of profound contact with Cobá that we finally have a series of burials that come from residential contexts, many of which can be considered nonelite and which have been described in chapter 6.

The period of the construction and initial use of Sacbé 1 (the causeway appears to have been reused during the Late Postclassic, possibly as a pilgrimage route [see Ardren 2003], although there is no evidence of use during the Terminal Classic) has been surrounded by polemical debate concerning what the construction of such a massive feature means regarding the relationship between these two cities at this time (Loya Gonzalez and Stanton 2013, 2014). While we hold this relationship to have been complicated beyond the ways in which we can detect archaeologically at the present moment, we also believe that the data outlined in chapter 1 point to one simplified conclusion; Cobá incorporated Yaxuná into a Late Classic state system and held considerable sway over the politics of this city in central Yucatán for some time.

Through this whole trajectory, the local people of Yaxuná appear to have enjoyed relatively good health throughout their lives, as compared to other urban inland populations of the Maya lowlands. There is little evidence that the incorporation into the Cobá state had a negative impact on people’s access to basic resources. Biocultural practices among the locals tie in with peninsular modes of dental and head looks during the Classic period and at the same time manifest continuity in family traditions and physical embodiment right through the end of occupation. An astounding degree of homogeneity characterizes also the collective phenotype of Yaxuná’s settlers. Not all of the ones we sampled were locals, however, as we have learned in chapter 2. Here, as in other settlements, food intake relied heavily on tropical crops such as maize once weaning had occurred.

The burials from this period, albeit from a relatively small sample, exhibit some interesting patterns that we can consider as we take into account the data indicating foreign control at the site (see chapter 6). First, the burials tend to be placed in unprepared graves without any stones lining a crypt space. These simple interments set themselves apart from the burial cohorts of coeval peninsular sites, as is apparent at Late Classic Caucel, where 34 of the 36 recovered graves were cists (Rodríguez Pérez 2010). Also, the many lavish tombs and crypts from Dzibilchaltún and Oxkintok display funerary arrangements, which clearly surpass in quality and quantity the ones seen at Yaxuná at that time (Andrews and Andrews 1980; Fernandez Marquinez and Varela Torrecilla 1992; Uriarte 2004; Varela Torrecilla 1998; Velázquez and García Barrios 2002; Welsh 1988). This is also a time in which shifts in rituals involving human body processing make themselves felt and anticipate the shift toward the close of the Classic period. As described and discussed in chapters 4 and 8, isolated skull deposits, one of them with signs of burning, were deposited in the liminal spaces around the North Acropolis during this time and most probably marked the end of nonfunerary protracted body rituals, as we have argued.

Around the time when Sacbé 1 was abandoned at the end of the Late Classic, Yaxuná experienced an influx of cultural ideas from western Yucatán. As discussed in chapter 1, ceramic and architectural traditions have a distinctly western feel, particularly from the Puuc Hills region, which has been thought to have been the locus for a powerful state-level
development during the eighth and ninth centuries AD (e.g., Andrews and Robles 1985; Kowalski 1987; Schele and Freidel 1990; Schele and Mathews 1998). While there is little evidence of a strong ruler at Yaxuná during the seventh century, revitalization projects in the monumental core during Yaxuná IVa target many of the important royal buildings. Str. 6F-3, where the earliest royal was located in Burial 23, was refurbished with a new central staircase and superior temple (Suhler 1996). Str. 6F-68, a council house, was abutted to the south side of Str. 6F-4 where the Burial 24 tomb context was located. Other areas, such as the north side of the East Acropolis and the southern end of the principal north-south site axis were refurbished. All of these projects indicate that the leadership at this city was allowed to re-create the sacred space, emphasizing important monuments that likely figured prominently in the memory of Yaxuná as a royal seat and regional capital (Stanton and Freidel 2005).

The so-called Puuc Group, located just to the south of the North Acropolis, however, has been interpreted as evidence of direct administrative control from the Puuc region (Novelo Rincón 2012), indicating that while local leadership may have experienced a revival, its allegiance, and perhaps to some degree its decision-making, was tied to western interests. We concur with Novelo that the ceramic (most likely an indicator that market ties also gravitated toward the west, influencing both the actual products arriving to Yaxuná and the styles locally produced at Yaxuná, which followed to a great degree the fads in the Puuc region, but not necessarily imposed on the people of Yaxuná) and architectural traditions indicate a profound connection to the Puuc region, one that implies alliance and political influence. Such a situation may also be reflected at early Chichén Itzá, although little is known from this site from the eighth century given the tremendous amount of later architectural overburden (Pérez de Heredia 2010, 2012).

One of the primary questions we wanted to test, however, when we started the analysis of the human remains at Yaxuná, was to what extent, if any, was there evidence of actual movements of people to Yaxuná during this period, specifically from western Yucatán and the Puuc Hills region in particular. Settlement data indicate a large demographic increase at the site during Yaxuná IVa (Shaw 1998) and also across the region, with many rank III and IV sites founded or expanded during this period (Stanton and Magnoni 2013). While we are hesitant to put numbers to this demographic increase due to concerns of how to calculate populations (e.g., sheers numbers of structures, floor space, artifact densities [e.g., Culbert and Rice 1990; Sanders et al. 1979]) and issues of contemporaneity given the large chronological blocks of time we work with in the Maya region, it is evident that such a massive population increase from Yaxuná III to Yaxuná IVa must have been in part due to migration to the region. Yet given the ceramic and architectural data, we were intrigued by the possibility of how this influx of people to the area could have been shaped by individuals and families moving from the west. Interestingly, the bioarchaeological data from Sr isotopes and dental morphology seemingly indicate that few if any individuals from the Puuc region resided at Yaxuná during the Late Classic (Price et al. 2017). Despite some potential isotopic coincidence with the Puuc region in the skeletal sample analyzed, such a signature also characterizes other territories in the Yucatán Peninsula, limiting the possibility of a precise inference.
on the region of origin of these foreigners. In a similar fashion, the dental morphology data indicate only an indirect relationship between Yaxuná and the Puuc sample. In other words, Yaxuná shares some patterns of dental morphology with the Puuc sample (which could witness biological interaction between the sites), but this affinity is not consistent in all the analyses, more likely indicating a general common morphological background rather than real genetic flow. Unfortunately, we do not have similar samples from Chichén Itzá at this time to test whether the population there was also characterized by similar stable isotope and dental morphology patterns.

Despite the large increase in population size at Yaxuná and its surrounding hinterland during this period, the burial data indicate that the overall health of the population was relatively good in comparison to other areas of the Maya lowlands with comparable data (see chapters 3 and 4 of this volume). Again, we have to be somewhat cautious given the relatively small sample size and the fact that all of the burials come from the urban core of Yaxuná (none of the surrounding sites have yielded skeletal remains despite some excavations in Terminal Classic households [e.g., Johnson 2012]). Yet the largest burial sample at Yaxuná comes from this period with no clear indications of poor health, suggesting that (1) the political and social revival at Yaxuná was accompanied by reasonable access to basic foodstuffs; and (2) the process of increased urbanization at the site did not negatively impact people’s health.

One particularly important burial that deserves some discussion given the changing political situation at Yaxuná is Burial 22. Str. 6F-12, where Burial 22 was recovered, is a relatively low, square platform situated in a small ceremonial plaza just to the east of the core of the Puuc Group. The western side of this plaza is flanked by a long platform dating to Yaxuná IVa and supporting two large towers faced with modeled human figures that approximated large stelae (Novelo Rincón 2012). The eastern side of the plaza was bounded by two long buildings with broad staircases (also dating to Yaxuná IVa) that could have functioned as bleachers for an audience to watch events in the plaza. The northern side of the plaza was delimited by the staircase rising to the North Acropolis and the southern side by the Terminal Classic ballcourt. Str. 6F-12 was on the axis connecting the refurbished staircase of Str. 6F-3 to the ballcourt; all of these structures followed the north-south axis of the site, which was first delimited by the Late Formative causeway (Sacbé 3) on which the plaza and then the ballcourt were built. Suffice it to say that this plaza occupied a critical sacred space in the site’s geomantic plan and that Str. 6F-12 was its central element (see Stanton and Freidel 2005).

Given the presence of a stucco-lined room in the central portion of Str. 6F-12 and copious evidence for burning, this platform was originally interpreted as the remains of a sweatbath by its excavator (Johnstone 1994). As we have argued in chapter 8, however, we believe the morphology of this platform is distinct from other reported sweatbaths (e.g., Child 2006), and there is a much more likely explanation as to the function of the building—it was a platform for celebrating major public calendric ceremonies, such as New Fire ceremonies or others related to yearly agricultural cycling.

Ceremonies set up in a similar fashion have been described for other pre-Hispanic, colonial, and ethnographic settings in the Maya area and beyond (Bricker 1989; Coggins 1975;
Grube 2000; Taube 1988). Specifically among Contact period Nahua, these culminative festivities were dramatized through the drilling of virgin fire on the opened trunk of victims who were to die by heart extraction and sometimes were cast into the divine brazier where they were burned alive and reduced to bones and ashes, a process that resonates with the myths of primordial autosacrifice (Graulich 1988:158–159, 2005). Although fire was used among the Maya for ritual body processing as early as the Formative period, fiery consumptions gained prominence toward the Late to Terminal Classic period (Tiesler 2016). This also appears to hold true for the Puuc area, where centrally located triadic groups brim with entombed or cached cremains, surpassing the frequency of human fire-exposures reported from contemporary settlements across the Maya lowlands.

The importance of the appearance of such fire rituals at this time concerns the fact that such ritual activities are linked to Central Mexican belief systems. Given that ideological expressions in art and other material culture at Chichén Itzá draw heavily on cultural traditions from the Mexican altiplano, we suggest that important cultural traditions such as the celebration and commemoration of important calendrical dates were already shifting toward Central Mexican expression at Yaxuná prior to the inclusion of this site, in broader processes centered at Chichén Itzá that would have led to the arrival of Sotuta Complex ceramics and other material culture such as Pachuca obsidian. In light of the presence of Central Mexican–inspired imagery at Puuc sites such as Uxmal and Kabah during the ninth century AD, we should not be surprised that certain elements of this ideology inspired by the Puuc tradition are found at other sites. Yet it is interesting to note that the process of ideological change appears to be more gradual than previously thought. Instead of this ideology arriving at Chichén Itzá through migrations of foreigners to central Yucatán and then spreading to other areas of the peninsula (along with Sotuta Complex ceramics) as part of a process of bellicose state-building (cf. Andrews and Robles 1985), the relationship between sites like Yaxuná and the Itzá capital may have been much more complex. In any event, we believe that the burial record at Yaxuná, in particular Burial 22, gives us some insight into these complexities.

**THE RISE OF CHICHÉN ITZÁ**

As important as the early Terminal Classic florescence at Yaxuná was in terms of restoring it to regional prominence as an important social, economic, and political center, it was also short-lived. The dating of the abandonment of Puuc-inspired monumental architecture is rather unclear, but it appears to have occurred sometime during the ninth century AD when Sotuta Complex ceramics from Chichén Itzá begin to appear at the site. The dating of the early occupation at Chichén Itzá itself has been the subject of considerable debate (see Andrews et al. 2003). A non-Sotuta ceramic complex roughly correlating to Yaxuná IVa has been reported at the site (Pérez de Heredia 2010, 2012; José Osorio León, personal communication to Stanton 2014), but evidence of occupation dating to this period has been difficult
to access given the tremendous architectural development that Chichén Itzá witnessed during later phases, and which might have masked or erased evidence of previous occupation. Yet most scholars concur that a fully developed Sotuta Complex was in use at the site when monumental architecture and hieroglyphic inscriptions, including dates, were constructed across the site starting as early as the mid-ninth century AD (e.g., Ringle et al. 1998).

While the origins of Chichén Itzá are somewhat obscure, there is little doubt among scholars that it became one of the most important urban centers in Mesoamerica during the ninth century AD. As with Yaxuná during the early part of the Terminal Classic, the population expansion at Chichén Itzá can be explained only if large-scale migration to the area is taken into consideration. Interestingly, across the northern Maya lowlands, there appears to be a demographic decline around AD 900 when Chichén Itzá was in the midst of its demographic growth. Although we must be careful using ceramics to date the abandonment or decline of sites through the region as local styles may have continued for some unknown time past AD 900 (while Sotuta-style ceramics gained popularity in certain areas [Stanton and Bey, n.d.]), many communities appear to be in decline or are outright abandoned around this time.

In the near hinterland areas around Chichén Itzá, including Yaxuná, a clear pattern emerges as communities began to adopt the local ceramic styles popular at the Itzá capital at about this time. A regional survey by the PIPCY project over a roughly 500 km² area to the immediate southwest of Chichén Itzá has documented that a massive depopulation occurred, and most of the rank III and IV sites documented for Yaxuná IVa times were abandoned or significantly reduced demographically by Yaxuná IVb times. Apart from Ikil, and potentially X’togil, there are no sizable communities outside of Yaxuná in this area for the latter part of the Terminal Classic. This area, however, is marked by numerous small hamlets, most of which we have documented in the vicinity of known cenotes (sinkholes). We believe that the reasons behind this change in settlement patterns are twofold. First, much like the urban pull documented for Teotihuacan toward the end of the Formative period in the Basin of Mexico, Chichén Itzá drew in the surrounding populations during its process of urbanization. Second, the small hamlets that remained on the landscape, also noted to a lesser degree for Yaxuná III times, were the agricultural communities that sustained the subsistence system of the Itzá capital. Only a few larger centers, still quite small in comparison to Chichén Itzá (like Ikil), were left on the landscape, presumably to function as administrative nodes of the Itzá state in its hinterlands.

At Yaxuná itself, the Yaxuná IVa period has been most extensively researched by the INAH project directed by Lourdes Toscano (Novelo Rincón 2012; Toscano Hernandez and Ortegón 2003). The members of this project report the remains of a small village dating to Yaxuná IVb in the vicinity of the Puuc Group. Only one small vaulted structure associated with the North Acropolis is known from the period. Suhler (1996) interprets it as an administrative building used to oversee agricultural production and tribute of the small community living among the ruins of this once important city. A similar situation appears to mark the occupation at Xuenkal, further to the northeast (Vallejo Caliz 2011; Vallejo Caliz and Manahan 2014).
SHIFTS AND SUBSTITUTIONS IN MORTUARY PRACTICES

In an increasingly divisive and hostile political landscape that overshadowed the closing centuries of the first millennium in Yucatán, instability and violence left their print in terms of funerary continuity and change, in imagery, and in the (bio)archaeological record itself. Anthropogenic marks abound in the skeletal vestiges from the epicenters of many lowland Maya capitals, especially during the Terminal Classic, when there is more evidence of mass violence, materialized in large ritual bone features in late deposits at sites such as Calakmul, Becán, Kohunlich, Colhá, and Chichén Itzá itself (Barrett and Scherer 2005; Massey and Steele 1997; Medina Martín and Sánchez Vargas 2007; Tiesler and Cucina 2012b). Around this time, evidence for body cremations, boiling, and trophy taking increases substantially in the middens of urban cores. Namely, ritual body processing reminiscent of Xipe rites, with full horizontal sternal sections, hand and foot deposits, and defleshing of whole bodies, make their way into deposits at Champotón, and further south, Toniná and El Lagartero (Gómez Cobá et al. 2003; Hurtado et al. 2007; Ruiz González et al. 2016). At Chichén Itzá itself, a number of perforations on skulls documented from its sacred sinkhole are testaments to their prior exposure on skull racks when fresh (Tiesler and Lozada 2017). We see changes in ritual posthumous body processing and in patterns of ritualized violence in humans, which are clearly aligned with Mesoamerican highland practices to the west (Miller 2007). What stands out here is that none of the aforementioned changes in ritualized body processing have been documented at Yaxuná itself. This could be an indirect statement of loss of regional leadership, although ultimately, absence of evidence does not mean evidence of absence.

Likewise, the funerary patterns of Chichén Itzá and the area apparently under its control seem to anticipate the mortuary programs that became widespread in Yucatecan inland centers during the first half of the second millennium AD. From this time forward, dead bodies and bones were harbored in simple graves and were also deposited in collective cist graves (ossuaries), many of which contained the remains of up to hundreds of individuals. These ossuaries include many previously cremated remains, either in a fleshed state or already dry. The assemblages from Temple 5C12 (in the Initial Series Group) and the Ossuary from Chichén Itzá (Cobos 2003; Fernández 2006; Schmidt 2007, 2009; Thompson 1938; see also Headrick 1991) are pertinent examples of this type of human disposal, as are the later cremation contexts documented in Mayapán’s central structures Q-95 and Q-98 (Serafin 2010) as well as the island center of San Gervasio and coastal Tulum (Vargas Pacheco 1997). Stacked on the floors of tombs, cists, or vertical shafts inside temple cores, the ossuaries are reported to have integrated all age groups and both sexes when biographic data are documented. These centrally controlled sanctuaries suggest that individual commemoration was gradually replaced by a more collective focus in mourning and veneration, directed toward kin groups and whole communities. The uses of heat and fire become ever more visible in the ancestral transformations of dead noblemen (and surely women), now venerated in animated statues, vessels, or portraits plastered on top of the boiled skulls (Landa 1982). The prolonged
The curation of, and social interaction with, these ancestral portraits may explain their absence in today’s funerary record, also taking into account the Spaniards’ radical efforts to destroy idols and other symbols of heresy.

While no human remains have been recovered from either Yaxuná or Ikil for the latter part of the Terminal Classic, there is one burial context from the early facet of this period at Yaxuná itself that sheds some light on the social processes at work at the transition from Yaxuná IVa to IVb. Burial 25, located beneath the floor of the westernmost room of its council house (Str. 6F-68) on the North Acropolis, has been interpreted as a primary female burial whose grave was desecrated when Chichén Itzá militarily defeated Yaxuná (Ambrosino 1996; Ambrosino et al. 2003).

The construction of Str. 6F-68 dates to Yaxuná IV, and Burial 25 appears to have been placed in the center of Room 3 when the building was erected. Given the themes in the complex basal façade of the structure, it has been interpreted as a *popol nah*, or council house (Ambrosino 2003, 2007); banners, mat symbols, and human figures are all included in the images, which grace the façade. The funerary crypt had been lined with stones, defining an ample interior space whose sizes were 190 cm long by 50 cm wide, consistent with local practices as described in chapter 6. Five flat stone slabs covered the top of the cist, one of which was found out of place when explored by the team (figure 9.1). Being relatively shallow, the sepulcher was revisited and then resealed sometime after initial interment. This second entry probably took place during the massive terminal burning of the area during the ninth or tenth century AD (Ambrosino 2007).

The taphonomy of the individual in this burial indicates that the upper body was badly disturbed by the reentry event (figure 9.2). Yet given that the legs and lower trunk rested in...
their original articulated state without showing any effect from bundling, the corpse must have been laid down extended on top of the floor in a complete state. As the funerary space was sealed and was left unfilled, the corpse decomposed gradually and was eventually visited by meso and macrofauna (figure 9.3) before filling up with soil.

The reentry is inferred from the hole dug into the crypt from the above floor. This hole dates to a massive destructive event at Str. 6F-68 when the building was burned, the vaults pulled down, and numerous ceramics vessels were broken and scattered on the floors and
directly in front of the building. This activity must have taken place long after skeletonization, perhaps decades or even a century after initial interment. Breaking into the crypt led to disturbances and reductions of this context as well. No traces of the mandible or any cranial bones were encountered by the excavators, which suggests these segments were extracted. This scenario is confirmed by the presence of four loose teeth (all bearing a conical root), which fell out of their sockets prior to the removal of the skull. As the cranial parts, and possibly certain grave goods, were extracted, the upper trunk was disturbed, including both upper arms, which had been lifted during this occasion (figure 9.4). Although present, the left lower arm seemed dislocated, whereas the right lower arm had been left intact and articulated, at the side of the ipsilateral hip bone. The bones of the hand were recorded in their anatomically expected area.

It is noteworthy that the offerings of Burial 25 were scarce and incomplete. Scattered jadeite beads and the fragmented part of a stone mirror base that was documented in the thoracic area of the skeleton seemingly indicate that these represent the remains of more extensive grave goods that were removed. The only apparent grave goods that were intentionally left in the context were deer remains that rested at one side of the right arm. By revising the entire context, it is clear that the crypt was broken into and grave goods, the skull, and mandible were all removed.

The abandonment context of Str. 6F-68 itself was rather spectacular. There is evidence that the building was burned and that a termination ritual was conducted. Burned and broken ceramic vessels from both Yaxuná IVa (Cehpech) and Yaxuná IVb (Sotuta) complexes were found among heavily scorched vestiges on the floors of all three rooms and littering the front of the ruined building. It was at this time that a small hole was dug into the floor at
the center of the Burial 25 context indicating that the disturbance of the burial was part and parcel of a larger ritual event at this structure.

The original hypothesis is that the Itzá warriors ritually ended this council house and killed the ancestor buried beneath the floor as an act of ending the political history of this storied urban center (Ambrosino 2007). Upon further analysis of the context, several points can be made that in some ways alter this interpretation. First, the mixing of Sotuta and Cehpech complex ceramics at Yaxuná, as demonstrated in the Str. 6F-68 abandonment deposit, may not be a product of Itzá warriors bringing their material culture to the site. In all of the cases where Sotuta-looking ceramics have been recovered by the PIPCY project (at Ikil, Popolá, and Yaxuná these have been recovered from stratigraphic excavations and at numerous other sites through surface collections), Sotuta ceramics are always found with Cehpech ceramics. We have yet to record contexts where only Sotuta ceramics are present, indicating that local styles persisted after Sotuta style made its way into the region either through local production emulating this style or through market processes that likely included the supposedly large regional market at Chichén Itzá itself. Thus, the mixing of Sotuta and Cehpech ceramics may not be a result of foreign ceramics arriving with the invading forces, but may have been already present at Yaxuná prior to its political incorporation into the Itzá state.

Second, the removal of the skull has parallels to other cases of ancestor worship (and relic taking) across the Maya area and at Yaxuná itself (Fitzsimmons 2011; Weiss Krejci 2006) and,
as we have argued above, is especially relevant as a Postclassic phenomenon, during which the heads of apical ancestors were curated and worshipped on altars. While we still believe that the evidence of contemporary defensive features at the North Acropolis supports the idea that the local rulers of Yaxuná were defeated by the expanding Itzá state, the context of Str. 6F-68 may actually represent a termination ritual conducted by the people from Yaxuná who migrated to the Itzá capital during the “gathering” of regional elite. The destruction of the building may have had ideological overtones given the spread of the Feathered Serpent cult throughout the peninsula at this time, but could also be understood as a clausura or ending ceremony in line with ancient Mesoamerican traditions concerning abandonment of important places. Thus, the treatment of Burial 25, including the removal of grave goods and the skull, was very likely part of the process of transporting the lineage ancestors to the new place of residence, the growing urban center of Chichén Itzá.

THE POSTCLASSIC

The Postclassic period at Yaxuná is only represented by ceremonial deposits. As of yet, no Postclassic settlement has been identified at the site, although there were Postclassic communities in the region at sites like Cacalchén and Mopila. At Yaxuná, only a single burial dates to this period. Burial 19 was recovered inside Str. 6F-3 during the explorations of Operation 65 (figure 9.5). It dates to Yaxuná V (1200–1519) and was associated to Chen Mul ceramics. Isotopically determined as a local (Price et al. 2017), this individual was determined as a robust, middle-aged adult male who must have lived a physically demanding life before passing in his fourth or fifth decade of life.

The individual was found some 60 cm below ground, in a corridor just below the central staircase that leads to the central patio of the North Acropolis to the top of the structure. This space, which led to a series of internal passageways leading eventually to Burial 23, was certainly a liminal locus with ritual implications and was on the central north-south axis of the site. A Chen Mul censer, found near the body (figure 9.6), and a series of faunal remains, including deer skulls with their antlers, serpents, and birds (figure 9.7), all indicate the ritual importance of the burial of this individual (Götz and Stanton 2013; Stanton et al. 2010).

As Burial 19 was not lined or covered with stone slabs or rocks (figure 9.7), we consider it a simple platform intrusion, which seems quite shallow and reduced in dimensions for a human interment (35 x 60 cm). However, there are indications that decomposition did occur in an unfilled environment after the corpse had been placed on its right side as a fully flexed bundle. Perhaps wooden tablets were used for the purpose, which would not leave any material evidence today. The orientation of placement aligns with the north-south axis of the monumental access staircase. Afterward, the void filled in with fine whitish sascab.

This burial would indicate that ancestral practices, including the actual burial of human remains in key areas of Yaxuná’s monumental zone, were ongoing after the abandonment of the site. While it is difficult to understand the nature of these deposits, which also include
small C-shaped altars associated with Chen Mul incensarios, they clearly demonstrate an active historical memory of the site. These ruins were still important and remembered by the people living in the region. Whether the burial of this Postclassic individual represents an offering to this sacred place, or the interment of an important person from this later period in the ruins of this historically significant place remains unclear, however.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This closes the scope of this commented synopsis of life and death in Classic period Yaxuná and beyond through the lens of native bodies, corpses, and skeletons. In our efforts to encompass and understand the complexities and conditions of the ancient life- and deathways among Yaxuná’s settlers, we have confronted different approximations and lines of evidence. Although challenging when compared to the data-rich study environments that characterize the central lowland Maya kingdoms with their rich epigraphic records, we hold

FIGURE 9.5. Skeletal disposition of Burial 19 (Yaxuná Project, Selz Foundation).
**FIGURE 9.6.** Chen Mul censer associated with Burial 19 (Yaxuná Project, Selz Foundation).

**FIGURE 9.7.** Arrangement of Burial 19 with censer and associated faunal remains (Yaxuná Project, Selz Foundation; skeleton redrawn by V. Tiesler).
that this body-anchored approach does endorse a new venue of scholarship, especially when
engrained with information gleaned from the regional record.

While this last idea rounds out the main theme of this volume, it also brings us back to
several points of departures from within this book. One assertion was that human skeletal
remains, studied within their mortuary contexts, tell the too often unwritten life and death
histories of ancient people; those very actors who forged settlement life and manufactured
the material products targeted by conventional archaeology. We often forget that archaeo-
logical sites were made because of, and thanks to, these often unnoticed and forgotten play-
ers. Nonetheless, understanding their skeletal remains is quintessential in understanding
any past society, through the daily lives of their inhabitants, their food habits, lifestyles and
diseases, and even the extremes of birth and death. Death is the ultimate indicator of living
conditions, but it is also, and most importantly, the event that locks up a whole life into a
skeleton, waiting patiently for somebody willing to read the story that it has to tell.

In this interdisciplinary approach, we have endeavored to disentangle some of the unheard
voices of Yaxuná’s ancient past by combining multiple lines of evidence that deeply sink their
roots in archaeology, bioarchaeology, taphonomy, ethnohistory, physical anthropology, and
skeletal biology. The joint interpretation of these data has brought back to us some of the
essentials of past Maya life already. Such are the conditions experienced during birth and
upbringing, migration and cultural identification, quotidian food intake and health issues,
and life expectancy and death. We have learned that in Yaxuná, just as in any other settlement
of its time and cultural frame, natural death would be followed characteristically by ritual
interment and active cycling in memory of the deceased as the protracted funerary pathways
of the many successive multiples seem to inform us. These behaviors stand apart from violent
episodes of change and terminal closure at the site, such as the event that led to the cram-
ing of several bodies into Burial 24 or the extraction of parts of Burial 25 from the building
before its fiery destruction. These mortuary conducts signal broader circumstances of social
contingency, crises, and political change.

After the last urban inhabitants of this once important city left, the platforms and tem-
pies of Yaxuná were soon ruined and overgrown but remained for posterity in the midst of
the northern Yucatecan forest. In the centuries after abandonment the land of the site was
sporadically visited and used for refuge and disposal of the dead, materialized by an isolated
Postclassic deposit (Burial 19; figure 9.7) and what appears to be a clandestine interment of
a female youth during the nineteenth century AD (Burial 10; figure 9.8). The adolescent’s
body had been positioned in Catholic fashion, extended on her back with her arms crossed
over the chest. A metal bullet was found together with the remains and could well have been
the cause of her death.

During the last century, this scenery has changed again with Yaxuná reclassified as an
archaeological site, which has been exposed over the past thirty years. A narrow road sets
it apart from the touristic hub of Piste and the archaeological development of Chichén
Itzá. The ancient ruins of Yaxuná lie next to the small Maya village of the same name
(Yaxunáh), nested within the Yaxcabá municipio (municipality), an area hard-hit by the
nineteenth-century Caste War. This is a small Yukatec Maya community of less than 1,000 people, embedded in the midst of communal lands that are worked corporately by the local ejidatarios since the agrarian reforms that took place some 80 years ago.

Although still marginalized, modernization arrived in the community during the twentieth century and brought with it tap water, access to health care and medication in the form of a local clinic, and telephone service. Over the decades, infant mortality has dropped significantly while life expectancy has risen thanks to antibiotics and sanitation projects. Despite the improvements, rural poverty and lack of agricultural sustainability has drained the local population, parts of which have emigrated to Mérida, the Caribbean coast, or the United States. Traditional healers (yerbateros) and shamans (j-meen) are still an integral part of the local community, where locals continue to speak the Yukatec Maya (Bascopé and Guderjan 2016).

In the meantime, the ruins of Yaxuná, along with many of the other Classic Maya cities in the region such as Chichén Itzá and Cobá, were soon reenvisioned in the emerging pictures of an “archaeological” past in Mexico, pasts that would be used as a base for modern identity construction and economic activity. In this context the narratives gleaned from the ancient inhabitants of these centers become ever more relevant. At last the actual people who created these cities can have their histories told through their mortal remains. This closes the cycle of this study and this volume in which we have strived to learn about the past of Yaxuná and beyond, through the lens of its people.