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Architecture as Animate Landscape: Circular Shrines in the Ancient Maya Lowlands

Eleanor Harrison-Buck

ABSTRACT In this study, I develop a theory of landscape archaeology that incorporates the concept of “animism” as a cognitive approach. Current trends in anthropology are placing greater emphasis on indigenous perspectives, and in recent decades animism has seen a resurgence in anthropological theory. As a means of relating in (not to) one’s world, animism is a mode of thought that has direct bearing on landscape archaeology. Yet, Americanist archaeologists have been slow to incorporate this concept as a component of landscape theory. I consider animism and Nurit Bird-David’s (1999) theory of “relatedness” and how such perspectives might be expressed archaeologically in Mesoamerica. I examine the distribution of marine shells and cave formations that appear incorporated as architectural elements on ancient Maya circular shrine architecture. More than just “symbols” of sacred geography, I suggest these materials represent living entities that animate shrines through their ongoing relationships with human and other-than-human agents in the world. [*Maya architecture, animism, relational ontology, landscape archaeology, agency*]

RESUMEN En este estudio presento una teoría de la arqueología del paisaje que incorpora el animismo como enfoque cognitivo. Éste ha resurgido en la teoría antropológica debido al mayor énfasis en las perspectivas indígenas. A pesar de su relación directa con la arqueología del paisaje, los arqueólogos americanistas han tardado en incorporar este concepto dentro de la teoría del paisaje. Examino el animismo y la teoría de Nurit Bird-David (1999) de la “relación,” y sus expresiones arqueológicas en Mesoamérica. Analizo la distribución de conchas marinas y cuevas incorporadas como elementos arquitectónicos de los templos circulares Mayas. Más que “símbolos” de la geografía sagrada, propongo estos elementos como seres que dan vida a los santuarios a través de su continua relación con agentes humanos y no-humanos.

Developments in landscape theory have expanded our ideas about the built environment and sacred geography (e.g., Ashmore 2004, 2009; Ashmore and Knapp 1999; Bender 1993, 1998; Bradley 1998, 2000; Cosgrove 1998; Lawrence and Low 1990; Tilley 1994, 2004), bringing to light how “undifferentiated space is transformed into marked and delimited place” (Pearson and Richards 1994:4). The current approach to landscape archaeology views the “unbuilt” landscape not as a disjunctive backdrop but as part of a “conceptual continuum” that integrates the ancient built environment with the “natural world” (Ashmore 2002:1177; Bradley 1998, 2000; Brady and Ashmore 1999:125–126; Tilley and Bennett 2001). Advances in landscape theory have

laid important groundwork in developing our understanding of the “cultural landscape” (Knapp and Ashmore 1999:9). However, many current studies of landscape archaeology perpetuate a nature–culture dualism without critically evaluating its relevance in a given cultural context. Some scholars suggest that the notion of opposition and complementary counterparts is rooted in Western epistemology and that its indiscriminant use can sometimes obscure more than clarify our understanding of alternative ontological views (Alberti and Bray 2009:338; Bird-David 1999:68; Staller 2008:1–2). In the last several decades, anthropologists have begun questioning the “subjectivity” of our field and have shifted the attention to alternative indigenous ontological views that

often appear at odds with Western epistemology (Haber 2009; Harvey 2006).

In considering indigenous ontologies, more recent scholarship has reclaimed the term *animism* (Alberti and Marshall 2009; Bird-David 1999; Harvey 2006).¹ This renewed engagement with animism departs from Edward Tylor's (1993) traditional definition as "the belief in spiritual beings" to include a world that "is found to be, and treated as, a community of persons not all of whom are human" (Harvey 2006:11). In this new approach, animism is not a set of beliefs but, rather, a relational ontology centered on relationships between human and "other-than-human" agents (*sensu* Hallowell 1960; see also Bird-David 1999; Groleau 2009:398; Ingold 2006:10). Although the term *animism* still carries the baggage of a Western analytical category, the push to reclaim the concept has been driven by a broader effort to decolonize the field of anthropology. Scholars argue that the animist's theories of matter must be given equal weight to other theoretical paradigms "if we are to understand adequately the nature of ontological difference in the past" (Alberti and Marshall 2009:344).

Reclaiming the concept of animism has, in many ways, elevated the status of indigenous theory and broadened the theoretical landscape, but the crude application of the term in non-Western religious practices is threatening its usefulness as a concept. As John Monaghan (1998:49) notes, "anything that explains everything in the end explains nothing" (see his analogous discussion on the overuse of the term *ritual* in the literature). There is a risk that the indiscriminate use of the term *animism* will serve, at best, as a replacement for the term *indigenous* and, at worst, a shorthand for *primitivity* and, in the end, will not move the ontological project forward. This would only further the vast ontological divide between the "West and the rest"—the very thing that postcolonial scholars are working so hard to dismantle. Conceptualizing a world that appears entirely different from our own poses significant challenges to Western scholars, and some remain skeptical "that greater engagement with the concept of animism will speed de-Colonization along" (Fowles 2010:7). I remain optimistic, however, that a heightened awareness of alternative ontologies and more self-reflexive engagement with theory will strengthen the field and move it forward, not backward.

In taking on board the ontological project, it is tempting to highlight the differences in perspectives (i.e., they are animists, we are not; we are dichotomists, they are not). Although I critique below the use of Western taxonomies with regard to a strict nature–culture divide in current approaches to Maya landscapes, I am not suggesting we do away with oppositional categories all together (see, e.g., Brown and Emery 2008). I agree that it would be naïve to suggest that any group (Western or non-Western) is internally consistent and without contradiction. "To say that modern Western societies might express *both* a hard-headed materialism (in which things are reduced to mere lifeless objects) *as well as* a kind of enchanted animism (in which things are ac-

cepted as having an immanent power) is to acknowledge that societies can simultaneously maintain multiple contradictory ontologies" (Fowles 2010:8). This is what W. J. T. Mitchell (2005) means by a "double consciousness," where even in Western society we can move paradoxically from one instance in which objects lack agency to another in which they have "animism, vitalism, and anthropomorphism" (Mitchell 2005:10). Likewise, a relational ontology may be broadly applicable to different non-Western cultures, but contradiction and variation within and between these groups is an inevitable reality (for further discussion, see Fowles 2010).

Scholars of archaeology are now engaging in a dialogue "about the nature of ontology, materiality, agency and the respective roles 'objects' and 'subjects' play as agents in the world" (Alberti and Bray 2009:337). Approaches to relational, object-based agency theory have been inspired by the writings of Bruno Latour, Alfred Gell, Tim Ingold, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, and others. This work has led to a conversation about our assumptions concerning a universal Western ontology, with some now considering the possibility of multiple ontologies or worlds rather than multiple worldviews (Alberti and Marshall 2009; Henare et al. 2007; Holbraad 2009). Although I am in broad support of an "ontological breakthrough" (Henare et al. 2007) in archaeology, where alternative ontologies are considered and indigenous theory is taken seriously, I believe that arguing for such a radical divide and pluralized ontologies could undermine the decolonization process rather than move it forward. As Severin Fowles (2010) notes, the notion of multiple discrete worlds not only poses a challenge to archaeology but also is deeply problematic for indigenous descendants seeking to reconnect with their ancestral past.

To avoid homogenizing the "animist society," the concept of animism must be further defined as it pertains to the local context on a case-by-case basis. In this way, much of the advances in theories of animism are found in specific case studies, particularly among Amazonian and North Asian cultures in which forms of animistic religious practice have been documented ethnographically (Århem 1996; Descola 1996; Fausto 2007; Ingold 1998; Pedersen 2001; Viveiros de Castro 1998). Archaeologists, however, have been "slow to seriously incorporate these perspectives into [their] archaeological questions and interpretations" (Brown and Emery 2008:327; see also Losey 2010:20). It is only in the last several years that scholars have begun to incorporate a theory of animism in their approach to landscape archaeology and explicitly define what the term means in local terms using specific archaeological case studies (Brady et al. 2005:218–221; Brown and Emery 2008; Brown and Walker 2008; Groleau 2009; Losey 2010; Staller 2008).

Below I discuss current approaches to landscape archaeology and consider animism as a relevant concept. I consider Nurit Bird-David's (1999) theory of "relatedness" in our reconstructions of cultural landscapes and discuss animism as it pertains to the region of Mesoamerica, specifically for the Maya. I present a case study that examines three examples

of circular shrine architecture from several Maya communities in the Sibun Valley of Belize, dated to the Terminal Classic period (ca. C.E. 780–900). These buildings presented notably high densities of speleothems (cave formations) and marine shells that appear to have been incorporated as exterior architectural adornments. The transport and reassembly of these specimens within a shrine context shed light on the function and meaning of these special-purpose buildings. I argue below that the circular shrines are not just cosmic symbols replicating “sacred” geography. They are living and breathing landscapes, continually (re)generated through their ongoing engagement with the world they inhabit, which includes the annual cycles of seasonal change. As such, these buildings engender an animate landscape in a constant state of transformation.

LANDSCAPE ARCHAEOLOGY AND ANIMISM

In most of the earlier studies of landscape archaeology, the concept of animism represents a minor component or, as a term, is absent altogether (Ashmore and Knapp 1999; Bradley 1998, 2000; Tilley 1994, 2004). In a more recent review of studies in landscape archaeology, Wendy Ashmore notes that many scholars now view the Mesoamerican landscape as “alive, pervasively imbued with cosmologic meaning, or cosmovision” (2009:185). Yet, most of the studies she references are still dominated by a phenomenological approach, which emphasizes how landscape was experienced (e.g., through procession, pilgrimage, and ritual circuits) and structured (e.g., as a four-sided figure, cardinally oriented, with a center point or axis mundi; see Aveni 2001; Mathews and Garber 2004; Rice 2004, 2007). Although landscapes are no longer seen as “backdrops” of human experience, they still appear to be treated as “pre-discursive matter dressed over with meaning” (Nanoglou 2009:187; see also Butler 1993). Many of the current archaeological studies that address cognitive aspects of cultural landscapes tend to focus on the “symbolic aspects” of the built and unbuilt environments (Earle 2008; Koontz et al. 2001; Mathews and Garber 2004; Tate 2008; see also Rodning 2009:183–187 for a current review). One frequently cited example in Mesoamerican archaeology is temple-pyramids that are likened to artificial mountains, which often contain real or artificial caves (Brady and Ashmore 1999:132–133; Bassie-Sweet 1991:167; Benson 1985; Tate 2008:31; Vogt 1969:595). These mountain-cave complexes are described as symbolic replications of sacred geography (Benson 1985; Pruffer and Kinson 2005). David Stuart and Stephen Houston concluded: “The geography of the Classic Maya apparently involved a conceit in which there existed substantial overlap between natural and artificial categories” (1994:86).

The tendency to describe nature and culture as discrete categories, with the latter replicating the former, is prevalent in many landscape studies of ancient Mesoamerica. This nature–culture dichotomy suggests that nature is not only separate from culture but also antecedent to it. Some argue that such a perspective relies on Western taxonomies that are

not universal ontological categories and that may be misleading without further qualification (e.g., Latour 1993; Viveros de Castro 1998). Ancient Mesoamerican cultures, like the Maya, would not characterize sacred geography as either “real” or “imitation.” An artificial cave, for instance, was not differentiated from a natural cave because the latter were also seen as constructed features that served as the home of the deities (Pugh 2005:63). As Linda Schele and David Freidel noted some time ago, sacred geography among the ancient Maya “was not located in any one earthly place, but could be materialized through ritual at any point in the natural and human-made landscape” (1990:67). A strict dichotomy that divides natural and human-made space obscures this fluidity. In the case of the ancient Maya, sacred points in the cultural landscape (whether “real” or “human made”) served as portals to and from *Xibalba* (the underworld) and came in many different forms, ranging from cave openings to temple doorways to the body of a king (Schele and Freidel 1990:67–73; see also Bassie-Sweet 1991, 1996). Thus, reproductions of sacred geography “are not necessarily built on exact replication, but on the reassembly of things that have historical and meaningful referents” (Mills and Ferguson 2008:340).

For the Maya, caves and other special features in the landscape, whether artificially or naturally produced, become designated places for ritual because they “mark important thresholds where human and non-human actors interact” (Brown and Emery 2008:300). Maya ritual performance, such as the offertory tradition and the practice of cave- and water-related ritual, are not symbolic reenactments but actual “ceremonial negotiations” capable of producing real change. Such rituals are keyed into the meteorological conditions, such as seasonal changes and other cyclical movements in the “animic cosmos” (Ingold 2006:16). This kind of ceremonial engagement creates a type of perpetuated and reified landscape whereby modified or unmodified landscapes and objects, such as speleothems, can become portals of animate power (Brady et al. 2005:221). Elsewhere Ingold describes this animate quality not as a human projection of imagination onto things but, rather, as a condition of being alive in the world—“the dynamic, transformative potential of the entire field of relations within which beings of all kinds, more or less person-like or thing-like, continually and reciprocally bring one another into existence” (2006:10).

In the case study presented herein, speleothems and marine shell may have been specially selected by the Sibun Maya because of their sensuous and acoustical properties and, perhaps more importantly, because of their ability to serve as portals of animate power. Ethnographic accounts for the Maya suggest that a life force is “awakened” through ongoing relationships with human and other-than-human agents and their “animating actions,” such as dripping water, censing, breathing, spitting, bleeding, and so forth (Stross 1998:32–35). The epigraphic and archaeological data support the idea that speleothems and marine shell became active agents through similar (nonhuman) animating rituals involving the life forces of water and blown air

(Houston and Taube 2000). Importantly, this animic ontology does not necessarily require humans to provide the agency and, in many ways, is analogous to other indigenous ontologies in which animate forces arise on a continual basis through ongoing interaction and negotiation with other human and nonhuman agents (Ingold 2006). In this way, I suggest circular shrines became socially meaningful places, invoking real agency through reciprocal engagement and mutual responsiveness with other things in the world and reflecting what Bird-David calls a “nested web of relatedness” (1999).

RELATEDNESS AND ANIMISM AMONG THE MAYA

Against materialistic framing of the environment as discrete things stands relationally framing the environment as nested relatednesses.
—Nurit Bird-David, “Animism” Revisited: Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology

In reconceptualizing animism, Bird-David (1999) contrasts the “modernist” approach for understanding the environment, using an objectivist paradigm and a taxonomic classification, with the “indigenous” approach to acquiring knowledge. The latter approach is based on a relational ontology, a type of engagement with the environment described as a two-way conversation of a “responsive relatedness” with things in the world (Bird-David 1999:77; see also Ingold 2006). Bird-David (1999:68–69) defines *relatedness* as a different way of knowing the world that emphasizes one’s relationship with it, which is perceived as “mutually responsive changes in things in the world and at the same time in themselves” (see also Alberti and Bray 2009; Harvey 2006; Ingold 2006). Broadly speaking, this definition aligns well with what we know about Maya animistic society from ethnography and the epigraphic record. Ethnographic accounts attest to the complexity of the Maya relational ontology, whereby the *ch’ulel* (a soul or life force) “typically with several parts” routinely engaged singly or in combination with other human and nonhuman agents in an ongoing negotiation (Gossen 1996b:533; see also Monaghan 1995; Vogt 1998; Watanabe 1992). The animate, inner life force of the Maya *ch’ulel* is not a singular entity; rather, it is made up of multiple, distributed parts or coessences that “inhabit the blood and energize people and a variety of objects of ritual and everyday life” (Houston and Stuart 1996:292). Based on his readings of ancient Maya hieroglyphic texts, David Stuart (1996:157) concludes that this soul-like quality also was present in ancient Maya society in both human beings and objects. Carved inscriptions accompanying royal Maya portraits demonstrate how objects were persons—in this case, extensions of the royal self; they were, themselves, active participants in elite ritual and developed relationships with other human and nonhuman agents (Gillespie 2008; Stuart 1996). Both the epigraphic and ethnographic research demonstrate that this “extrasomatic” self is fundamental to Maya thought, both today and in the past (Gossen 1996a; Houston and Stuart 1996:292).

In addition to Bird-David’s (1999) theory of relatedness, elements of this partible and relationally constituted self resemble phenomenon documented by Gell (1998) in his semiotic theory of distributed personhood. Gell’s (1998) semiotic theory helps (Western thinkers) to conceptualize how inanimate remains become persons and serve as living extensions of “the multiple self.” Some scholars suggest that the Gellian approach runs the risk of “[treating] objects *as if* they were persons” and masks the “irreducible sense [that] objects just *are* people” (Holbraad 2009:434; see also Alberti and Marshall 2009). I recognize this potential pitfall with a semiotic approach but find the theoretical framework regarding distributed personhood useful for conceptualizing the fractal and composite nature of the Maya animate coessence (see Harrison-Buck in press; Hendon 2010, in press). Bird-David’s theory of “relatedness” (and also Ingold’s [2006] “meshwork”) enhances Gell’s approach, offering a relational ontology that better approximates the fluid and relationally constituted nature of the Maya coessence and its potential relationships with human and other-than-human persons, as we understand it from the epigraphic and ethnographic contexts.

In trying to make sense of a relational ontology, Bird-David (1999:86) concluded that “the language of dualisms and dichotomies is an obstacle” that does more to obscure than to clarify the animist’s perspective. In Mesoamerican archaeology, particularly in the context of many panregional cosmological principles, dualisms seem inescapable (male–female, day–night, sun–moon, east–west, birth–death, rebirth–sacrifice, etc.). Scholars have long noted that, rather than oppositional dichotomies, these pairs are perhaps better understood as complementary counterparts (Earle 2008). Yet, as Inga Clendinnen observes, “[Western] notions of ‘opposition,’ or even of ‘duality’ or ‘complementarity,’ are unhelpfully crude, as apparently firm divisions waver and melt one into another” (1991:248). Although divisions, such as body and soul, are not exclusive to Western culture, this strict dichotomy cannot fully account for the complexity and fractal nature of the soul for some indigenous groups, like the Maya, for whom multiple souls with detachable parts are an irreducible multiplicity (cf. Fausto 2007).

The notion of transformation and balance, as part of a cyclical continuum of life, death, and regeneration, may provide a closer approximation of the Maya ontological view of the animate coessence and its relationship with other human and nonhuman actors (Harrison-Buck in press). The animate forces behind cosmic struggles are not static beings with inherent agency but are manifest through animating actions (trumpet blowing, bloodletting, etc.). In viewing animism as an action and part of a larger process of relatedness, rather than something inherent and self-contained, we shift the focus “from whether or not something is imbued with animated qualities to an examination of the contexts and practices that might make them so” (Groleau 2009:399). Here I examine this web of nested relatedness within a particular context in

the Maya Lowlands—circular shrine architecture—and the ways in which these archaeological contexts through their associated shell and speleothems (as exterior architectural adornments) may have acquired animacy, agency, and meaning in the past. Below I provide a brief overview of circular architecture in the Maya Lowlands and introduce the finds from the Sibun Valley in Belize. I consider the shrine complex in terms of design, layout, and construction technique. In a final discussion section, I further explore the ontological view of the shrine context as an animate landscape.

CIRCULAR ARCHITECTURE IN THE MAYA LOWLANDS

In the Maya Lowlands, round platforms are known as early as the Middle Formative period, circa 900–500 B.C.E. (Aimers et al. 2000). Later versions of circular architecture, corresponding to the Terminal Classic and Postclassic periods (C.E. 700–1450), are quite distinct in both form and function from the Formative period round structures. Those firmly dated to the Terminal Classic period are reported from a number of sites situated throughout the Maya Lowlands (see Figure 1). The Caracol at Chichén Itzá in northern Yucatan is one of the largest and most elaborate examples of Maya circular architecture in the Lowlands (Ruppert 1935). Other well-known Terminal Classic structures include examples found at Uxmal in northwest Yucatan (Kowalski et al. 1994), Nohmul in northern Belize (Chase and Chase 1982), and Seibal in Petén, Guatemala (Smith 1982).

Recent revisions in the chronology of Northern Yucatan have had significant impact on the historical reconstructions of Chichén Itzá, setting the dates of this important center back as much as 150–200 years (Andrews et al. 2003). This temporal shift suggests that the first of four phases of the Caracol may date as early as the eighth century (vs. the early tenth century). Although a Late Classic dedicatory cache associated with the initial phase of construction may lend support to this early date, the primary occupation of the Caracol likely dates to the ninth century—coeval with the circular shrines in the Sibun Valley and others found throughout the Maya area. Jeff Kowalski and colleagues (1994) suggest that circular architecture found at sites like Uxmal and Nohmul is part of a shrine complex that stems from Chichén Itzá and when found elsewhere in the Lowlands are indicative of a strong interaction with this northern polity (see also Chase and Chase 1982:605–607).

Many have suggested that this architectural complex first developed in the north at Chichén Itzá and later moved south, but it is possible the reverse is true. Some epigraphic studies and ethnohistoric accounts suggest the original home of the Itza may have been the Petén Lakes region of Guatemala, prior to the founding of Chichén Itzá between C.E. 672 and C.E. 692 (Schele and Mathews 1998:187–203). If so, this opens up the possibility that Yucatec-style circular architecture, in fact, was rooted in the south and later moved north as these groups migrated to the Yucatán. A number of

Yucatec-style circular structures have been reported from the Petén, although none thus far appear to date earlier than the ninth century (Morales 1993; Smith 1982; Zalka 2008:134–135).

THE CIRCULAR SHRINE COMPLEX

Terminal Classic circular shrines were identified at three sites along the Sibun River: Pechtun Ha, Oshon, and Obispo. These modest-sized settlements located in the middle and lower reaches of the valley are at least a day's canoe ride to the Caribbean coast (see Figures 1–2). All three sites have a similar settlement configuration, and the shrines are well integrated into the overall site plan. In each case, the shrines are located within an enclosed plaza group surrounded on all sides by residential platform structures (see Figure 3). The shrines are obvious because of the high density of cut stone and rubble present on the surface compared to the other mounds, which are primarily of earthen construction with cut stone restricted to terrace retaining walls.

Immediately to the south of the riverside settlements is a hilly, karst landscape riddled with caves containing evidence of ancient Maya ritual activity (see Figure 2; Peterson 2006). Polly Ann Peterson and colleagues (2005) have been able to link the cave usage with settlement activity, identifying the breakage of speleothems in caves and the transport of certain specimens to special settlement contexts, including burials and circular shrines. Ceramic chronologies from settlements and caves suggest that most of this activity across the Sibun landscape took place during the Terminal Classic period (Harrison-Buck 2007; Peterson 2006). Archaeological investigations of the settlements and caves indicate that the Sibun Valley reached its height in settlement occupation, cave ritual, and long-distance trading activity at a time when Petén capitals to the west, such as Tikal, were declining in power at the end of the Classic period. The archaeological evidence suggests that the Sibun Maya shifted their political, religious, and economic focus away from the Petén heartland and developed some degree of interaction with Chichén Itzá, the northern Maya capital that became the dominant Yucatec power during Terminal Classic times (Harrison-Buck 2007; McAnany et al. 2002).

The recursive quality of circular shrines in the Sibun Valley may indicate a shared ritual function and meaning. The design, layout, and construction practices, along with the presence and distribution of associated artifacts and features, support the idea that wind, water, and fertility are themes associated with these buildings (which I discuss further below). Unfortunately, systematic archaeological investigations of circular architecture remain fairly limited in the Maya Lowlands. The only existing synthesis of Mesoamerican round structures was published by Harry Pollock in 1936, and detailed information on this architectural form is generally neither published nor widely available, which makes comparisons difficult to draw. Below I provide a comparative summary of the most well-documented examples from Nohmul, Uxmal, and Chichén Itzá, as well as

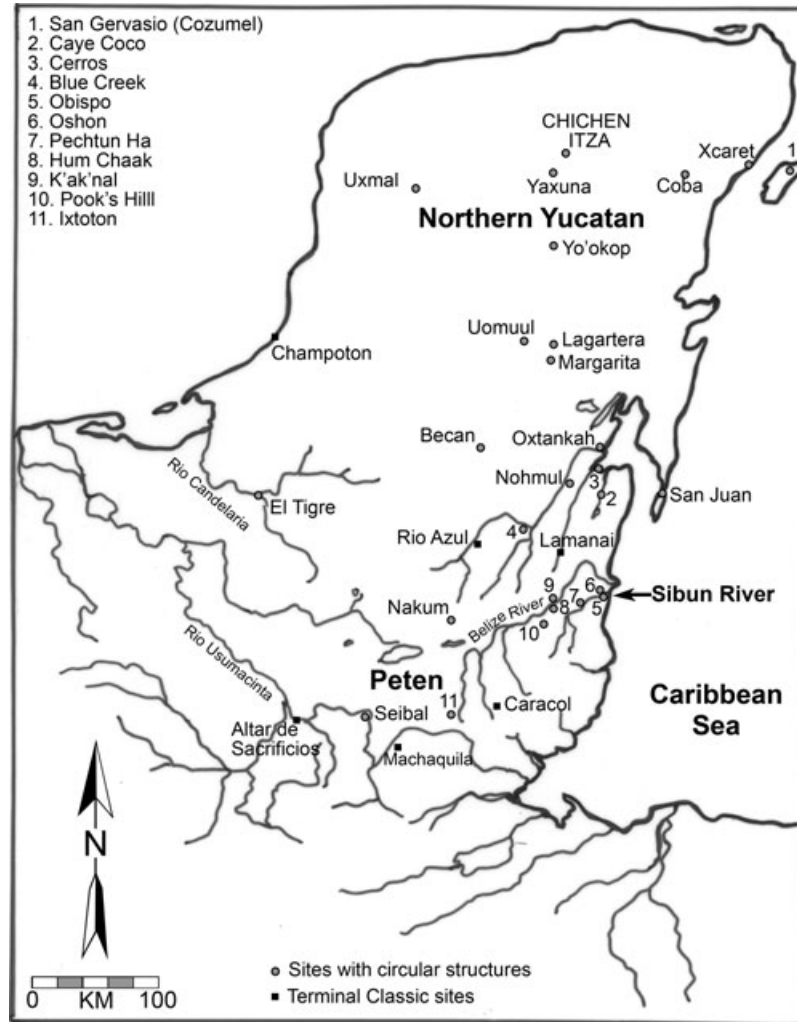


FIGURE 1. Map showing sites with Terminal Classic circular architecture.

those from the Sibun Valley. I define three discrete building types based on my excavations of circular architecture in the Sibun Valley that I also find present in the circular structures at other Lowland Maya sites.

DESIGN, LAYOUT, AND CONSTRUCTION TECHNIQUE

The design, layout, and construction of circular architecture in the Sibun Valley are highly patterned and share strong similarities not only within the valley but also with examples from throughout the Maya Lowlands. Through my investigations of circular architecture in the Sibun Valley and comparisons with other examples, I have been able to define three discrete building types (Types 1–3) for Terminal Classic circular architecture.

Type 1 structures are simple circular platforms that may or may not have a staircase leading to the top. In most cases, the Type 1 platform contains a cobble surface and does not show signs of a formally prepared plaster floor. These platforms sometimes have an overhanging cornice, such as the initial phase of the Caracol at Chichén Itzá (see Figure 4a).

In the Sibun Valley, only the Obispo site revealed a Type 1 platform (Structure 479–2nd), which represents the earliest phase of circular architecture in the valley. Other Type 1 circular architecture is found at Caye Coco in northern Belize (Rosenswig and Masson 2002:fig. 4) and Nakum in Petén (Zralka 2008; see Figure 1).

Type 2 structures consist of a superstructure with low stub walls about three or four courses in height (see Figure 5). Underlying the circular walls is a plinth that resembles a molding or low step circling the exterior. Unlike a basal platform, the plinth does not extend under the entire building, only under the superstructure walls. These buildings have a single doorway leading into an interior room. In some cases the plaza surface serves as the floor of the interior room, but in other instances the interior floor is built up roughly to the height of the plinth. The Type 2 architecture has been found at Obispo (Str. 479–1st B), Oshon (Str. 402–1st B), and Pechtun Ha (Str. 100–1st B) in the Sibun Valley. This architecture type may also be present in the circular structure at Nohmul in northern Belize (see Chase 1982:figs. 3–10).

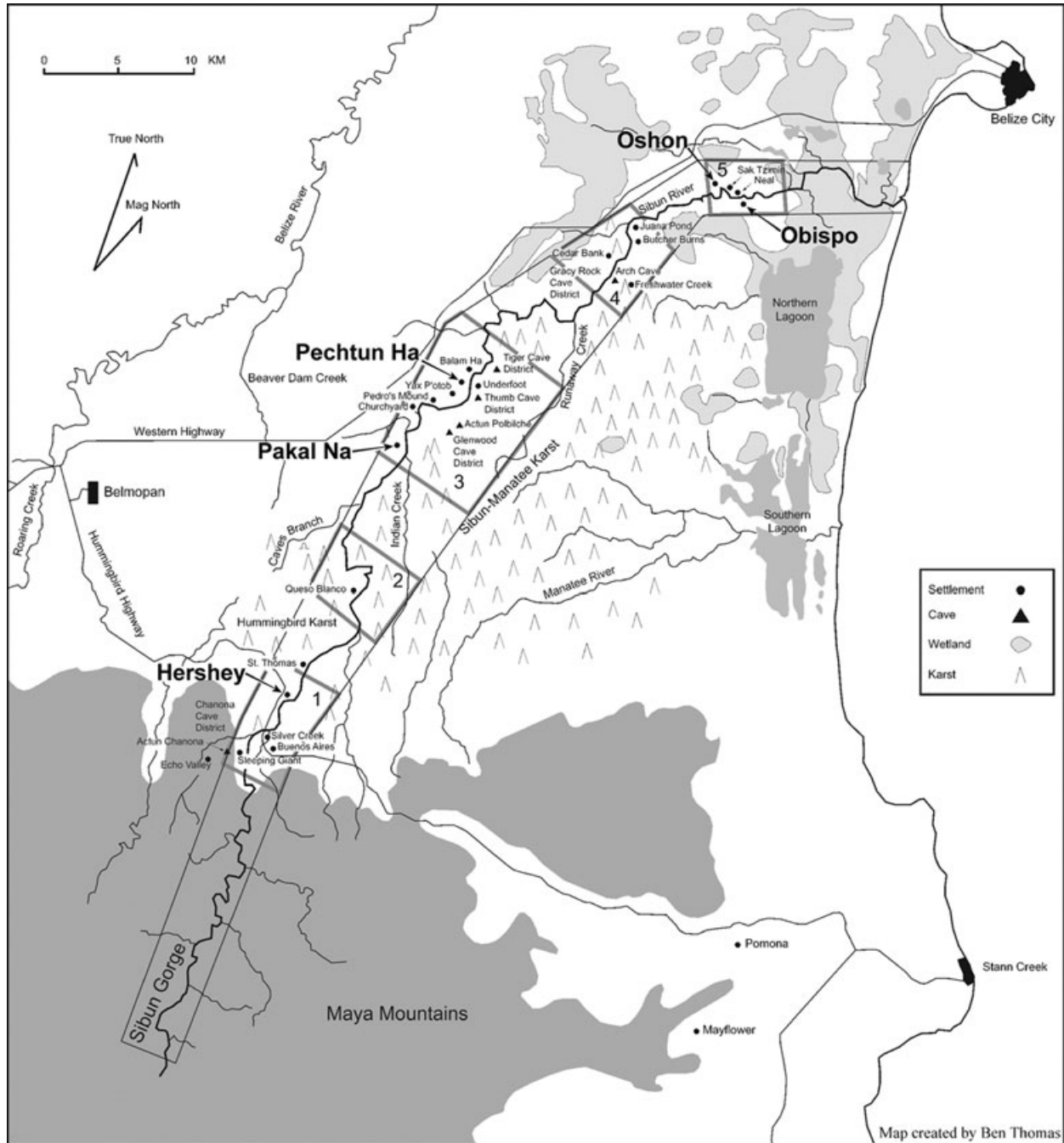


FIGURE 2. Map of the Sibun River valley highlighting sites discussed in text (map by B. Thomas).

Type 3 architecture marks the final construction phase of the Terminal Classic circular architecture in the Sibun Valley (see Figure 6). During this phase, the interior room of the Type 2 structure is in-filled with large, loose cobble and boulder fill and transformed into a solid, round basal platform. Set on top of this round substructure is another circular superstructure consisting of low stub walls as high as three courses. In the Sibun Valley this building type is poorly preserved but is found at Oshon (Str. 402–1st A), Obispo (479–1st A), and Pechtun Ha (100–1st A). Other examples of Type 3 architecture—showing a circular super-

structure positioned on a basal platform—are found in the final phases of the circular structures at both Nohmul and Uxmal and more than likely the second phase of the Caracol (Structure 3C15–1st C) at Chichén Itzá (see Figure 4b).² In some instances, stone used in the Type 3 superstructure appears to be recycled (robbed from elsewhere at the site), perhaps indicating a decline in building practice during the final facet of the Terminal Classic period. In both Type 2 and Type 3 buildings, a perishable structure with a pointed thatch roof appears to have capped the low stub wall of the superstructure.

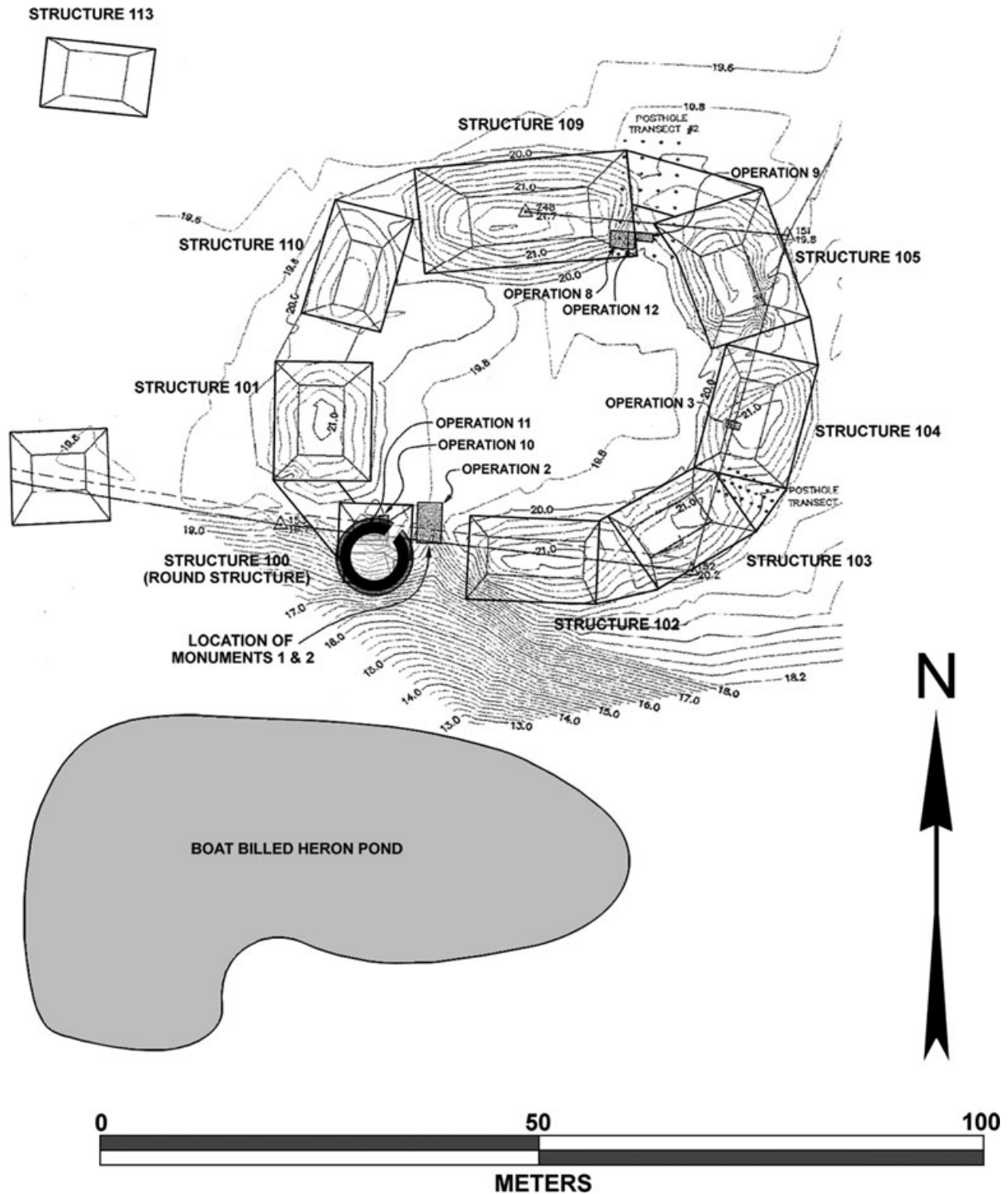


FIGURE 3. Site map of Pechtun Ha (map by James W. Sewall Company and K. Berry).

An overarching similarity found in nearly all Type 2 and Type 3 Terminal Classic circular structures is the presence of a low plinth that surrounds the building perimeter. All of these buildings contain a superstructure with an interior room and narrow doorway measuring between 1–1.5 meters, with substantial doorjambs (see Figure 7; Kowalski et al. 1994:fig. 5). The dimensions of the interior

room of the Terminal Classic circular buildings range from five to 12 meters in diameter. The outer dimensions of circular architecture, which include the round substructure, are more variable in size and format. The range of substructure size appears relatively proportionate to site size and the degree of architectural elaboration may express a hierarchy of elite prestige. In this regard, the substructure of the final

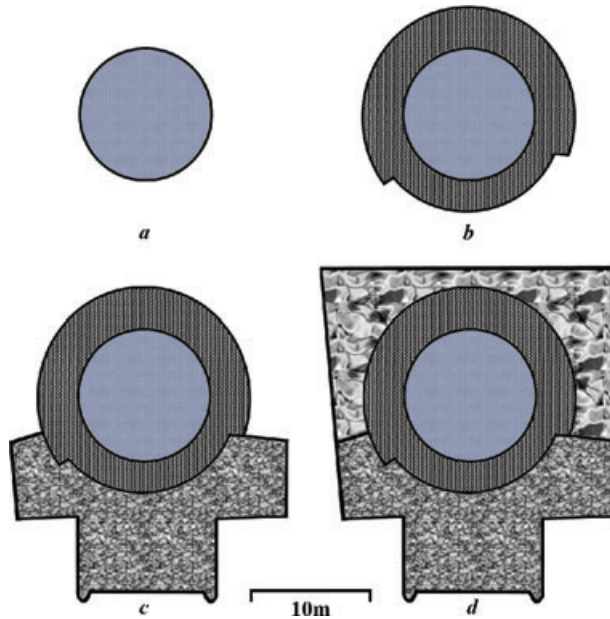


FIGURE 4. Plan View of the Four Phases of Construction for the Caracol at Chichén Itzá (Redrawn from Pollock 1936:fig. 31).

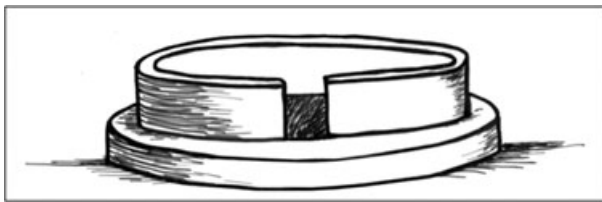


FIGURE 5. Type 2 circular architecture.

phase of the Caracol at Chichén Itzá is among the largest and certainly the most elaborate of all sites (see Figure 4d).³

The use of finely cut stones, often with an overhanging cornice and flagstone floor lining the interior room, are primary architectural characteristics of the Type 2 and Type 3 structures. These are not common architectural traits in the southern Maya Lowlands but are characteristic of architecture in northern Yucatán. Additionally, the construction of a superstructure comprising low stonewalls with partially perishable sidewalls and a pointed thatch roof is a less common building design in the southern Lowlands and is more frequently found in the Puuc and Northern Plains region of Yucatán. Round buildings with pointed thatched roofs or “spires” are rendered in several pre-Hispanic murals in the Temple of the Jaguar at Chichén Itzá (Pollock 1936:fig. 6a–c). Significantly, Spanish colonial accounts of the Aztec cities in central Mexico document circular buildings with pointed thatch roofs (Pollock 1936:6–12). For this reason, Alfred Tozzer (1930) interpreted the “spired” structures in the murals from Chichén Itzá as “foreign” dwellings built by Mexican invaders. Although it may have served as the roof type for the Maya circular shrines during the Terminal Classic, the “spire” thatch roof does not appear to be a common roof type in the Maya Lowlands.

The circular shrines in the Sibun Valley appear well integrated into the original site plans and suggest that these structures were part of a long-term cultural establishment in the settlement history. Similarities in site planning, architectural design, and building practice at all three sites in the Sibun Valley suggest a prolonged and shared tradition involving shrine architecture. Similarities with other examples of circular architecture suggest a connection with other sites, including Nohmul, Uxmal, and Chichén Itzá. Yet, the nature of this interaction remains poorly understood. Although many architectural traits are shared, some elements have not been reported outside the Sibun Valley, such as the incorporation of marine shell and speleothems (discussed below). More systematic studies are necessary, but the evidence from the Sibun Valley suggests a blending of local and foreign ideas.

MARINE SHELL AND SPELEOTHEMS AS ARCHITECTURAL ELEMENTS

A notable and seemingly unique find associated with the circular structures in the Sibun Valley was an especially high density of marine shell (see Table 1). The distribution pattern is striking when compared to the quantities retrieved from other contexts, including monument complexes, elite and nonelite residences, and associated midden deposits, where the amount of shell was considerably lower or absent all together. In the shrine contexts, different species of marine gastropods from the Caribbean were found, primarily *Strombus* and *Melongena*. In many cases, the shell is unworked, but in several instances the tips or apices of the marine shell were cut, and sometimes the edges were smoothed. Similar specimens have been found at the Terminal Classic site of Dzibilchaltun in Yucatán where they have been interpreted as shell trumpets and mosaic incrustations (Taschek 1994:figs. 19–20).

Other similar types of marine shell specimens were used as both decorative architectural elements and musical trumpets on a shrine at the site of Punta Islote on the southern tip of Cozumel Island in the northeastern part of Yucatán (Schavelson 1985:figs. 6, 12). Although not circular in shape, this Postclassic Maya shrine building contains a plastered conical roof embedded with marine shell (Freidel and Sabloff 1984). Many have observed that the shell trumpet adornments make sound when the wind blows, oriented on the roof in such a way that they create different sounds dependent on the wind direction (Schavelson 1985). The high density and distribution of shell deposits found around the exterior of the Sibun structures (see Figure 7) suggest that these shells may have been used in a similar fashion, perhaps as trumpeting accoutrements for the perishable façades.

Additionally, speleothems were found directly associated with the circular architecture at Oshon, Obispo, and Pechtun Ha (see Figure 7; Peterson et al. 2005). Small, portable speleothems were found surrounding the exterior areas of the structures, clustered around the doorways. Most notable, however, was the presence of massive, cut

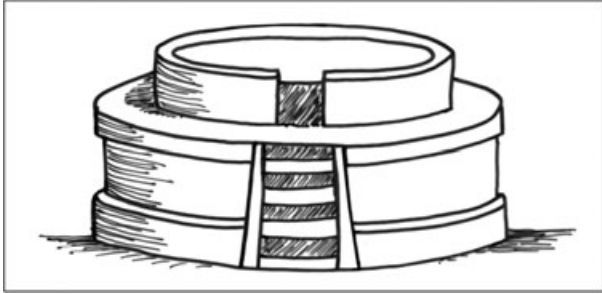


FIGURE 6. *Type 3 circular architecture.*

stalactites fashioned into large facing stones for the round structure at Pechtun Ha, restricted to the central doorway where the cut formations appeared to function as sizeable doorjamb stones (see Peterson et al. 2005:fig. 12.6). As doorjamb and exterior adornments, speleothems and seashells diacritically marked these special-purpose buildings. Speleothems came from caves in the Sibun karst located kilometers further away than limestone sources. The sheer quantity of marine shell is equally significant as it was hauled in from the Caribbean Sea, at least a day's canoe-ride distant, and placed around structure exteriors as opposed to other contexts, such as midden or trash deposits (see Table 1). I am unaware of any other reported circular structures outside of the Sibun Valley with associated speleothems and marine shell. It is conceivable that these materials were simply not identified or reported by the excavators. However, the lack of speleothems and marine shell may also indicate that localized ontological variation existed, perhaps influenced to some degree by what was available in the local landscape. It is possible that other materials were substituted as active agents in the context of circular architecture at shrine sites outside of the Sibun Valley.

Most scholars interpret Terminal Classic and Postclassic circular structures as ritual shrines dedicated to the wind god, Ehecatl, an aspect of the feathered serpent god Quetzalcoatl (Taube 2001:111–113).⁴ The discussion that follows further explores this relationship. I propose an interpretive model for the circular architecture that contextualizes the selective use of speleothems and marine shells as architectural adornments. My goal is to understand not only what these materials mean but also what they do as related objects. I argue that these materials were specially selected as shrine adornments because they served as portals of animacy, stimulated by an ongoing engagement with other conditions in the world that they inhabited—namely, the seasonal rounds that brought wind, rains, and agricultural fertility to the Sibun Valley on an annual basis. I suggest that this complex network of interactive agency involved ongoing negotiation between human and other-than-human agents, namely Ehecatl Quetzalcoatl and his divine attributes of air, water, and creation. Below I consider the circular shrine complex in terms of its “relatedness” with this multifaceted essence—“the breath that blew life and movement into the cosmos, the deity who made way for the rain gods

and traveled to the four corners of the cosmos” (Florescano 1999:51).

DISCUSSION: ARCHITECTURE AS ANIMATE LANDSCAPE

I propose that the cave formations and shell trumpets incorporated into the Sibun Valley circular structures may have served as the visual and aural signals of wind and the coming rains. Stephen Houston and Karl Taube (2000) refer to this dual operation of visual and auditory modes as a “meta-sensory view.” Yet, their examples are limited to depictions of the sights, sounds, and smells of the royal elite in Mesoamerican culture, using a so-called “synaesthetic code” primarily found in iconography and epigraphy. More analogous to the Sibun findings, James Brady and Wendy Ashmore (1999) describe a case of “sound hierophany” at the Maya site of Dos Pilas in the Petexbatun area of Guatemala. Here, a seasonal discharge of water from a cave underneath the royal palace can be heard a half kilometer away and aurally signals “the onset of the rainy season, and thereby the advance of the crop cycle” (Brady and Ashmore 1999:129). Like the Dos Pilas cave-palace complex, the placement of marine shell and speleothems on the circular architecture would convey to its listeners “a transformative call, a metronome of the seasons” (Brady and Ashmore 1999:129–130).

Much like caves, wind temples may have been seen as sources of water where wind and rain clouds are manifest (Taube 2001:113). Cave openings transported misty clouds, wind, and water—all elements of life-bringing rain—from the caves of the Sibun karst to the crops growing in the valley below. In Mesoamerican iconography, the mouth of a cave often is rendered as the fangs of a feathered serpent with the cave chamber as the snake's body. According to Taube (1986:51), circular wind temples and Ehecatl Quetzalcoatl shared a similar meaning with caves as a place of origin and creation. Spanish colonial accounts indicate that circular shrines dedicated to the Mexican wind god, Ehecatl, had doorways painted with the fanged mouth of the feathered serpent (Pollock 1936:5–18). The cave formations found concentrated around the doorways of the circular shrines in the Sibun Valley may have functioned in a similar fashion as the opening or mouth of a cave serpent to summon breezes and the accompanying rain. Maya ethnographic accounts suggest that speleothems were capable of invoking an animate essence (Brady et al. 2005), perhaps through their ongoing contact with dripping water that was fossilized in their form. Contemporary accounts indicate that cut speleothems were curated and placed on household altars where they were cared for as animate beings (Brown and Emery 2008:331). The portable speleothems associated with the circular shrines at Oshon and Obispo may share a similar life history, brought to the shrines because of their sensuous and animate properties that involved an ongoing relationship with water.

Creation, fertility, wind, and water are among the many divine attributes associated with the feathered serpent god,

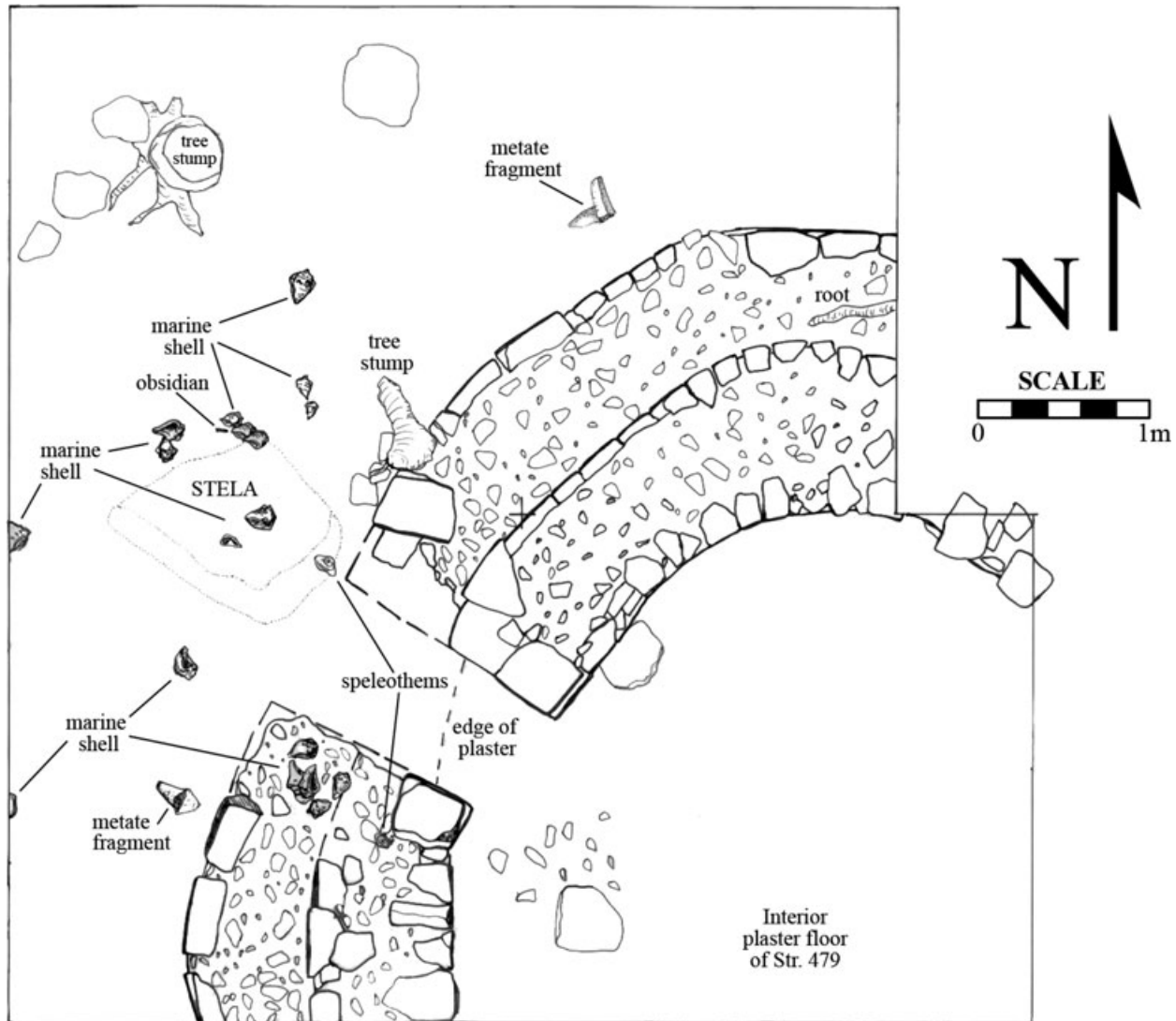


FIGURE 7. Plan view of Str. 479-1st B at Obispo, a Type 2 structure, showing plotted artifacts.

Quetzalcoatl, particularly its wind aspect Ehecatl (Taube 2001:108). Taube notes that as “a creature of wind and water, the plumed serpent is also commonly identified with the conch, a spiral shell that not only evokes the form of a coiled snake and whirlwinds but also converts blown air or wind into a thunderous sound” (2001:111). The conch shell pectoral is a common insignia of Ehecatl Quetzalcoatl, and the inner spiral of the conch often is equated with the coiled snake body (Taube 2001:111). William Ringle and colleagues (1998:186) have argued that circular shrines are rendered in the Mixtec codices as a coiled feathered serpent body. Notably, Postclassic Mixtec painted pottery and codical books present examples of circular shrines that may be analogous to the Sibun structures. These buildings contain perishable pointed thatch roofs surmounted by a feathered serpent body and conch shell *almenas*, or roof decorations, which designate them as wind shrines (e.g., Miller and Taube 1993:187; Pollock 1936:fig. 3).

Taube (2001:112–113) argues that the physical form of circular architecture, particularly the final form of the

Caracol building (*Caracol* means shell in Spanish) at Chichén Itzá, reflects its function as a Wind Temple dedicated to Ehecatl Quetzalcoatl. The final phase of the Caracol contains a vaulted room with four doorways encircling a central column and a spiral stairway leading up to a small chamber with a series of windows or apertures. It has previously been suggested that the windows were used for astronomical observation (Aveni 2001; Aveni et al. 1975, 2004; Ricketson 1928:218–222; Ruppert 1935:233–237). However, Taube suggests, “they may have had a more pertinent function—the creation of breezes or wind within the temple” (2001:113). I have found that circular shrines in the Maya Lowlands do not have a strict solar-oriented position within plaza groups, which also argues against their function as an astronomical observatory. They are usually situated in close proximity to the rivers or directly overlooking water bodies and often are located on high banks or elevated ground (see Figure 3). The positioning may have been strategic in terms of riverine transportation but also in terms of catching the strong winds that still can be

observed today in these locations at the onset of the rainy season.

In both Mesoamerica and the U.S. Southwest, *Strombus* and *Melongena* marine gastropods were used as shell trumpets in association with a feathered serpent cult as early as the ninth and tenth centuries (Boekelman 1936:29; Mills and Ferguson 2008; Schaafsma 2001; Taube 2001). Among the Pueblo and Zuni (and perhaps also the Maya), the shell trumpets were said to transform into animate beings during the Plumed Serpent ceremonies, which were aimed at controlling rain and bringing about good things (Mills and Ferguson 2008:353). Only when the trumpets were blown did they become animate with the roaring voice of the serpent (Boekelman 1936:27; Mills and Ferguson 2008:341–343). Whether the shell trumpets were blown by humans or other-than-human forces, they manifest the vital essence of the feathered serpent the moment they sounded. The acoustical sounds produced by the shell adornments on the Sibun circular shrines may have functioned in similar manner, bringing to life the thunderous voice of the feathered serpent in his wind aspect—a generative life force with agency capable of bringing wind, rain, and fertility to the valley year after year.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

When “animism,” considered as a generally applicable theory, is seen from the perspective of the local episteme a complex network of relationships comes to light. Focusing on the relationships instead of on the related things or beings, “animism” is revealed as a local theory of relatedness. —Alejandro Haber, *Animism, Relatedness, Life: Post-Western Perspectives*

The Maya ontology presented herein is neither inherent nor static but, rather, a localized status that is profoundly transformative. As Haber (2009) and others observe, this relationship is based on active negotiations between human and other-than-human persons and, therefore, has the potential for disharmony and imbalance if mutual responsiveness and reciprocity is lacking. The complex nature of a relational ontology for the Maya is expressed in the fractal, animate coessence of the feathered serpent. His aspects of wind, rain, fertility, and creation demonstrate his transformative and irreducible nature. His complex “meshwork” of relationships in the world (Ingold 2006:13) are manifest in the circular shrine context through various portals—in this case, speleothems and marine shell as sensuous and acoustical architectural adornments. I argue that these materials may signal the transformative call of the rainy season and Quetzalcoatl himself as he transforms into his many divine aspects. The circular shrine, with its assemblage of marine shells and speleothems, was not simply a model of “sacred” geography cloaked in cosmic symbols but an animate landscape and a living and breathing cosmos. That speleothems and marine shells are not found in all circular shrine contexts suggests that (despite the presence of widely shared cosmological principles across the Maya Lowlands) local ontological variation exists among groups and is identifiable

TABLE 1. Raw Counts of Marine Shell from Oshon and Obispo.

<i>Oshon Site</i>	
Context	Shell count
Circular shrine (Structure 402)	44
Elite residence and midden (Structure 401)	2
Non-elite residence and midden (Structure 424)	0
Elite residence and midden (Structure 437)	2
<i>Obispo Site</i>	
Context	Shell count
Circular shrine (Structure 479)	167
Monument complex (main plaza)	0
Elite residence (Structure 475)	14

in the archaeological record through contextual, site-by-site analysis.

As a means of relating in (not to) one’s world, animism has direct bearing on landscape studies in archaeology. Yet, surprisingly, few scholars have seriously considered this ontological perspective in landscape theory. Many of the archaeological studies that address cognitive aspects of cultural landscapes perpetuate a nature–culture dualism by characterizing the built environment as symbolic of “nature” and regarding animism as a projection of human imagination onto things (Ingold 2006:10; Rodning 2009:183–187). “In using terms such as ‘ascribed,’ ‘beliefs,’ or ‘symbolic constructs’ to describe the agency of non-human persons and things, we dismiss non-Western ontologies while running the risk of overlooking the ‘real’ material implications of interactions with these active agents” (Brown and Walker 2008:297–298). Taking animism seriously means defining the ontological inconsistencies and variation and how they operationalize in the local landscape. In this way, scholars can contribute to a postcolonial discourse concerning the relevance of local knowledge in archaeological interpretations and elevate indigenous theory to the level of other theoretical paradigms in the field of anthropology.

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NOTES

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1. Although animistic religious traditions are not exclusively non-Western (e.g., “modern” New Age belief systems), in archaeological studies most equate animacy and relationality with an indigenous ontology (Brown and Emery 2008:302).
2. The final construction phase of the Caracol appears to have obscured earlier building phases. Ruppert (1935:272) acknowledges the possibility that some form of masonry superstructure may have existed when the earlier circular platform of 3C15–1st C was constructed (see Figure 4b). A 12.19-meter gap in the plinth that surrounds the base of Str. 3C15–1st C suggests it may once have had a central staircase leading up to the top of the circular platform. The western doorway of the final phase of the masonry superstructure (Str. 3C15–1st A) aligns with this gap, supporting the idea that some form of masonry superstructure was in place during this earlier phase.
3. Although the final phase of the Caracol substructure (Structure 3C15–1st A) is square, the earliest two phases of the Caracol contain round substructures (see Figure 4a–b).
4. Epigraphers now recognize that the Mayan word commonly translated as “god”—*k’u* or *ch’u*—is more precisely understood as “sacred entity” and “that the notion of a ‘god’ inherently distorts nuances of indigenous belief” among the ancient Maya (Houston and Stuart 1996:291). Most scholars of Maya archaeology (incl. the epigraphers as well as myself) still retain the term *god* but acknowledge the limitations of its use and misleading Old World parallels.

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