

A Distinctive Maya Architectural Format: The Lamanai Temple

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Introduction

Towering pyramidal temples, arresting dynastic portraits, fantastic mythological figures; they leap to our eyes from the forest canopy, from incised stelae and from sculptured mask panels. These are the great signature pieces of Maya artistic production. They cap the ruins that initially attracted archaeological attention, and they continue to draw world-class tourism to the Maya area. A constant stream of vacationers shuffles past these great works, now cleared and restored. But they are seen merely as curiosities touted to sell excursions from Caribbean resorts. In ancient times, however, they were certainly not for holiday amusement; they were central to the civic and political life of Maya communities. Over centuries the Maya invested an enormous amount of time, energy, skill and resources in their production, and their functioning is generally acknowledged to have been critical to Maya civilization.

There is hardly an ancient Maya settlement of any size that does not have at or near its center a pyramidal temple, a group of such structures, or several groups, some with pyramidal components, others without. It is probably true to say that every Maya temple is unique in some way, and in the corpus of Maya temple architecture there must be hundreds, if not thousands, of pyramid-temples, large and small, each with its own specific formal properties. The norm, then, would seem to be that each temple presents unique architectural features within the general framework of Maya architectural conventions.

At Tikal, however, we find a striking exception to this rule. A distinctive temple type was repeated over and over again with relatively minor variations in different parts of the site and across many centuries. As far as I am aware, Lamanai, in Belize, is the one other Maya site where we find a comparable practice.

At Lamanai, as at Tikal, the ancient Maya maintained and repeated the same distinctive temple form over a significantly long time span at different locations within the site. This review outlines the Lamanai example and considers comparable patterns of variation in architectural forms of pyramid-temples at other sites in the Maya area.

As a secondary theme I am concerned with the conceptual role played by the pyramid, and with the underlying reasons that impelled the Maya to include such costly and time-consuming features as prominent parts of their major temples. It is generally taken more or less for granted that Maya pyramids were employed to raise the "temples" at their summits to a commanding position of height (see, for example, Stierlin 1968:96). This view of the structures is certainly correct, and the idea has obvious value; I suspect, however, that it may not be the whole story. A quite different motivation may actually have been more fundamental as an incentive for including pyramidal components in major temples. This review of the Lamanai Temple serves to open up the subject, at least in a preliminary way.

The attempt to confront a question such as the underlying intentions behind Maya temple design is obviously a game that can be played only in the realm of speculation. The Lamanai Temple, as I show below, provides particular physical evidence that I believe offers a modest grounding in support of experimental interpretative probing. Here I hope to establish at least a basic premise or starting point for the comprehensive treatment appropriate to a more complete analysis.

The Pyramid-Temple

The practice of building numerous pyramid-temples in more or less the same distinctive form at the same site,

or at related sites, seems to have been most energetically pursued at Lamanai, Tikal, and Chichen Itzá. The Cross Group at Palenque would appear to provide another example of a distinctive pyramidal temple type used more than once at the same site. In this case, however, the three temples involved were all built at the same time, and form related parts of a single architectural complex. They are, for this reason, not quite like the Lamanai Temple and Tikal Temple situations, in which the same architectural format was repeated at widely different times and in different locations.

Kaminaljuyú and the Rio Bec region provide other examples of a similar but less extensive practice using very different forms of temples. The particular temple model employed at Lamanai has been described as the "Lamanai Building" (Pendergast 1981:35–36). Here I propose to rename it the "Lamanai Temple," review its very limited presence in other Mesoamerican sites, develop a definition, and briefly consider at least some possibilities that it may raise for interpretation of pyramidal components in Mesoamerican temples generally. I proceed on the assumption that the term "temple" does not require definition. Although it is a functional term that implies certain activities which cannot always be demonstrated, in normal usage it is applied morphologically, that is, to structures with certain properties of form (see Andrews 1975:39 ff). It is in this sense that the structures I discuss here are customarily referred to as "temples." All specific architectural terms that I employ here follow Loten and Pendergast (1984).

The Lamanai Temple, the Tikal Temple, and the Castillo at Chichen Itza are examples of distinctive pyramid-temples that present architectural forms not found elsewhere. The Rio Bec temple, with twin towers formed as images of pyramidal temples (Piña Chan 1985:94–98), would provide a fourth example were it not for the fact that similar structures appear at Becan (Potter 1977:46–56), Xpuhil and Chicanna (Piña Chan 1985:35–44, 46–50) as well as at Rio Bec — and hence are not clearly associated with any one site. In addition, each of the sites has only one example of the form. The structures do, however, provide an indication of the presence of formats similar to those of the Tikal Temple and Lamanai Temple at various sites. Their distinctive forms suggest that they might have served a function loosely analogous to that of emblem glyphs.

Although the major temples at most sites no doubt embody strong local associations, and many are indeed quite distinctive in architectural form, the practice of repeating the same form over time and in different localities does not show up at other sites in the Maya area to the same extent as at these three. The obvious

other instance of a comparable practice within Mesoamerica involves the double temple of the Mexica, at Tenochtitlan (Matos Moctezuma 1988:123–145), Tenayuca (Marquina 1964:164–177), and other centers around the Valley of Mexico. This temple model was employed throughout the time of Aztec dominance at the Templo Mayor site, and appears in various other locations, as for example, Tenayuca, Santa Cecilia, Tlatelolco, Teopanzolco and Cempoala (Pasztory 1983:95–183).

The Temple of the Sun and the Temple of the Moon at Teotihuacán are certainly distinctive and similar in form, but relate to no other known examples other than the much smaller versions at Kaminaljuyú (Kidder et al. 1946:12–38). Tablero/talud terrace profiles may well be emblematic of Teotihuacán, but are applied to many buildings, not just pyramid-temples, and may carry a general implication of "sacredness" (Kubler 1973:279) rather than a proprietary one attached to a particular place.

The Tikal Temple Type

The notion of a temple type identified with a particular locus is best exemplified by the "Tikal Temple," a name that I apply to structures that possess a distinctive feature in their Building component. I use the term "component" in the sense in which it is employed by Satterthwaite (1943:16), who as far as I know was the first to use it in reference to the major morphological bodies that typically make up the aggregate form of pyramidal temples, not solely in the Maya area but throughout Mesoamerica. I have extended Satterthwaite's definition to include the notion of implied three-dimensional completeness, that is, none of the elements of a component extends into other components (Loten 1971:39).

The best known example of the Tikal Temple is Great Temple I (Coe 1990:589–613), a highly distinctive pyramidal temple simply by virtue of its height and vertical proportions. But the diagnostic feature that identifies it as a Tikal Temple pertains only to the Building component, and sometimes the Building platform (as a standard type of component, the "Building platform" may be defined as a platform that directly supports a Building component and has the same plan configuration, or "footprint" [Loten 1971:38]). The diagnostic feature of the Tikal Temple appears on north and south sides of the Temple I Building, which because of this feature has a distinctive compound appearance, as if it were actually two buildings, one pasted in front of the other.

The definition of the Tikal Temple never includes the pyramid, a component that is essentially vertical in

form and usually embodies at least three terraces — with some exceptions, as for example the structure known as the “Cono”, at Coba (Folan et al. 1983:75). It also excludes the basal platform, the component that is lowest in the vertical stack and set off by distinctive features of its own, often a wider stair, masks, different terrace profiles, or a larger surface area. Likewise the definition does not include the roof comb, a component usually obvious as an element located on the roof of a vaulted Building component with no apparent function other than that of displaying figural imagery. At times it may resemble an upper story, but it is usually not accessible, and is shaped in ways that do not suggest buildings. An exception is Structure 5D-91 at Tikal, which has a roof comb with rooms, doorways and windows.

At Tikal, the set of components listed above - basal platform, pyramid, building platform, Building, and roof comb, together with a sixth, the supplementary platform, apply to all major temples. This may be something unique to the site.

The element that produces the “dual Building” effect in Temple I is a recess in the exterior wall surface known as a “side inset” (Loten and Pendergast 1984:13). As far as I am aware, it was first discussed by Satterthwaite (1941:188[“indentation”]) in relation to temples at Piedras Negras, and he interpreted it there as an import from the Peten. At the time Satterthwaite wrote, the side inset form was well known from Maler's and Tozzer's plans of Temples at Tikal (Maler 1911:Figures 5, 29, 41, 44), though their text does not mention this feature specifically. Their Tikal map shows side insets on no less than 31 temples, several of which (Temples V and 33, for example) actually lack this feature. There may be in the neighbourhood of 30 Tikal Temples at Tikal (Loten 1971), the earliest of mid-Early Classic date, on the North Acropolis, and the latest possibly Temple III or one of a number of smaller temples among the final works of monumental construction at the site.

Great Temple IV illustrates how thoroughly, by Late Classic times, Tikal temple builders had come to see the side inset as an exclusively external element, not at all related to interior room disposition. This was a departure from the practice in the Early Classic, where it appears to have originated in direct relation to the sizes of the three rooms normally found in the temples. From this beginning at Tikal the side inset evidently took on a life of its own, and perhaps acquired some emblematic significance that may or may not have been present initially. Its extreme point of development can be seen in the Late Classic group known as the Seven Sisters, which have side insets, external implications of the presence of at least two rooms, on buildings that enclose single rooms.

The Tikal Temple turns up at several sites other than Tikal. Piedras Negras, the most remote, and with many Peten architectural traits, has two examples, Structures O13 and O15, with the side inset in their Building components, and three others, R1, R5, and K5, that display this feature only in the Building platforms and not in the Buildings they support (Satterthwaite 1943:Figure 3). Uaxactun, very close to Tikal, has only one example, Structure A-XVIII, a highly elaborate building of two stories that stands above a lower substructure platform not high enough to qualify as a pyramid (Smith 1937). Structure B of Group II at Holmul, only slightly farther away from Tikal, has the side inset in a Building that eventually had a total of four rooms (Merwin and Vaillant 1932:36).

Structure A-XVIII at Uaxactun is Early Classic, quite comparable in date to Structures 5D-23 2nd and 5D-24 2nd on the North Acropolis (Coe 1990:417–418, 432), which are the earliest known examples of Tikal Temples at Tikal. Chronological controls are not sufficient to indicate whether A-XVIII predates the Tikal examples. Building B, Group II at Holmul, in Merwin and Vaillant's (1932:20–41) Period II is also Early Classic, but has some properties, such as block masonry in Building walls, that suggest a date closer to the Middle Classic or at least late in the Early Classic, even though the structure directly overlies Protoclassic Holmul I material. Block masonry is ashlar in which the units are squared and relatively thick as compared with veneer masonry. Preclassic work often has block masonry on terrace facings but rubble masonry in Building walls of the same structure. Appearance of block masonry in Building walls may mark the late stages of the Early Classic; at least this is the tendency in monumental construction at Tikal.

Chichen Itza Temples

The Castillo at Chichen Itza provides the other well known example of a Maya site at which a highly distinctive pyramidal temple form appears in more than one location. The format is distinguished by a pyramid with stairs on all four sides that supports a Building with doorways on all four sides, but with one doorway elaborated by the presence of “serpent columns”. There are three known examples at Chichen Itza: the Castillo, the Temple of the Jaguar below and within the body of the Castillo, the Osario (Marquina 1964:Figures 262 and 275); and a fourth nearby, the Castillo at Mayapan (Marquina 1964:Appendix Figure 9). The last example is particularly germane here because the Mayapan temple is known as a device whereby the authority of Chichen Itzá, a legendary “Tollan”, was claimed by the upstart Cocom lineage in support of their dynastic legitimacy (Morley et al.

1983:164–171). This is the best-known Maya case in which the distinctive form of a temple is clearly associated with a site and its ruling elite.

The Architectural Format

The characteristics that identify the Lamanai Temple are more complicated than the simple presence or absence of a single feature as in the Tikal Temple, and involve a notion that I call “architectural format”. The Lamanai Temple is identified by the presence of a distinctive format rather than a specific feature. I use the term “architectural format” to refer to a pattern of relationship among the major parts, or components, of a structure.

In the great majority of Maya temples major components are simply stacked vertically. For example, Temple I at Tikal (Coe 1990), and the Temple of the Inscriptions at Palenque (Ruz 1973), both have four components: a pyramid, a Building platform, a Building, and a roof comb. Although the two temples have very different architectural properties, in both cases major components are arranged vertically, one on top of the other in a simple stack, and we can say that they both have the same architectural format.

The Castillo at Chichen Itza has only two components, a pyramid and a Building, but again they are arranged in a vertical stack and although the architectural character is decidedly unlike that of the Palenque and Tikal temples, the same format remains in effect for all three. In contrast, at Lamanai a more complicated and quite different arrangement of major components typifies the major temples. The components are not

organized as one vertical stack, but rather as two, one behind the other. The pyramid is placed behind the Building and does not support a Building on its summit.

The Format and Post-modernism. Architectural formats can be thought of as basic ordering devices. The term used in the architectural profession is “parti,” derived from the Ecole Des Beaux Arts and currently used conspicuously by post-modernists who wish to declare their liberation from positivist reductionism and orthodox modernism (Van Zanten 1977:115). The implication of parti in such usage is that of explicit formalism. In late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century architectural discourse, to declare that a building follows a parti is to acknowledge that the prime ordering considerations are essentially formal in nature and specifically not derived from functional, structural, climatic, economic or some other kind of technical analysis keyed to efficiency, as orthodox modernist architectural ideology demanded. It is then incumbent upon the post-modernist designer to substantiate the position that a formal parti is not simply a self-indulgent whim but actually embodies something of value to those who will build, pay for, and use (or live with) the resulting structure.

In an attempt to assess the implications of different formats or partis in Mesoamerican temples, the two models — modernist vs. post-modernist — define the range of possible interpretations. At one end stands the architectural expression of concerns regarding factors such as energy, cost, availability of materials, prevailing techniques of construction, modes of organizing labour, or intended patterns of usage. At

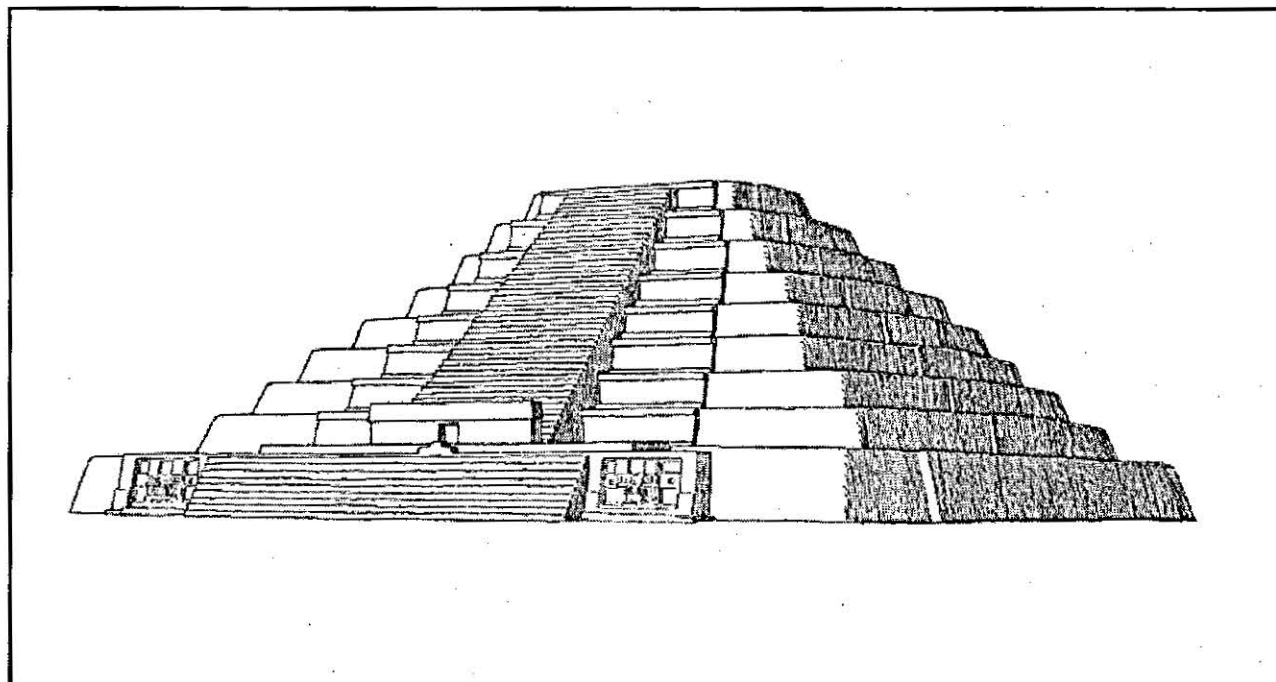


Figure 8.1 *Lamanai Structure N10-9, Early Classic (sixth–early seventh century A.D.) form.*

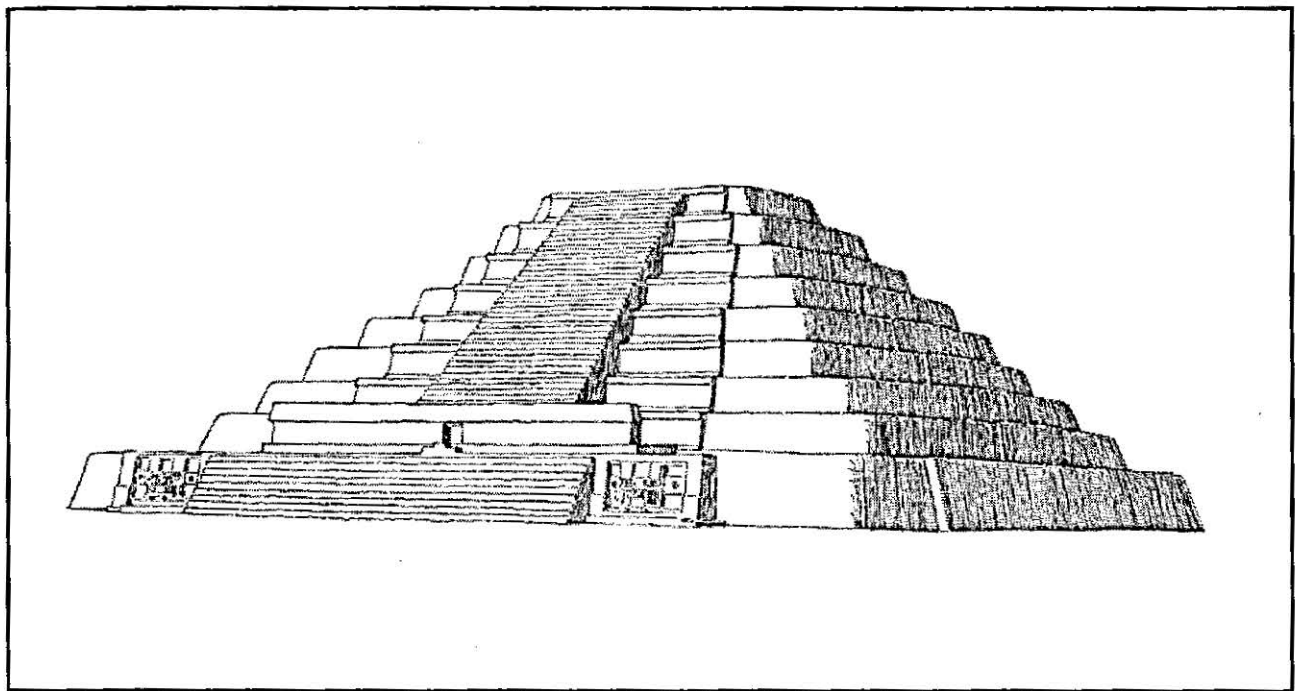


Figure 8.2 *Early Classic Structure N10-9, alternative Building reconstruction.*

the other is the embodiment of a world view which holds that the building provides an image of some fundamental truth; in so doing it reveals and substantiates the reality of the beliefs underlying the institutions that brought the building into being and “motivate” the activities housed within or immediately around it. It is my contention that the post-modernist approach is the more appropriate for interpretation of monumental Maya temple architecture, but full investigation of this proposition would require a treatment far beyond the scope of this chapter.

For convenience here, and because there is no other term in general use, I group all temples that share the simple vertical stack arrangement under the rubric “Tikal format,” although of course the great majority are not Tikal Temples with Buildings that have side insets. The Lamanai Temple obviously exemplifies the Lamanai format. A casual survey of Maya temple architecture indicates that the Tikal format is by far the more common and the Lamanai format comparatively rare. I shall describe briefly below the few examples found at sites other than Lamanai and Altun Ha, but first it will be useful to describe the examples known at Lamanai, more or less in the order of their clearing and excavation.

Lamanai Temples at Lamanai

The Lamanai Project, directed by David Pendergast, operated in the field from 1974 through 1986 (Pendergast 1981). Although the site’s Postclassic occupation was a primary focus of the research, it was not pursued without regard for the site as a whole.

Consequently, a very considerable amount of time and effort went into excavation of Preclassic and Classic structures, and the latter provided our examples of the Lamanai Temple type.

Structure N10-9

The first investigated, N10-9 is a 20 m-high structure that was excavated as an example of a major pyramidal temple, as was initially evident from the debris pattern. Preliminary clearing in 1975 on the upper centerline of its north face confirmed that this was the structure’s front, and revealed anomalous features that eventually coalesced into a vaulted, two-room Building that had been placed part way up the structure (Figure 8.3), in an episode of construction of early Late Classic date (Pendergast 1981:35) that was confined to the frontal (north) face.

As far as I am aware, the only other known instance of a building component other than a small “shrine” — an example of which is also present below this Building — located in such a position on a Maya temple that also incorporates a substantial pyramid is the western (Rio Bec style) building on the Pyramid of the Magician at Uxmal (Marquina 1964:768), in northern Yucatan. Interestingly, as had already emerged in ceramic analysis, there are other links to northern Yucatan at Lamanai (Pendergast 1981:48). However, there does not appear to be anything that suggests a specific connection between Lamanai and Uxmal, and there are no other similarities with northern Yucatan evident in Lamanai architecture. In any case, as will soon become clear, the Pyramid of the Magician is not an example of the Lamanai Temple type.

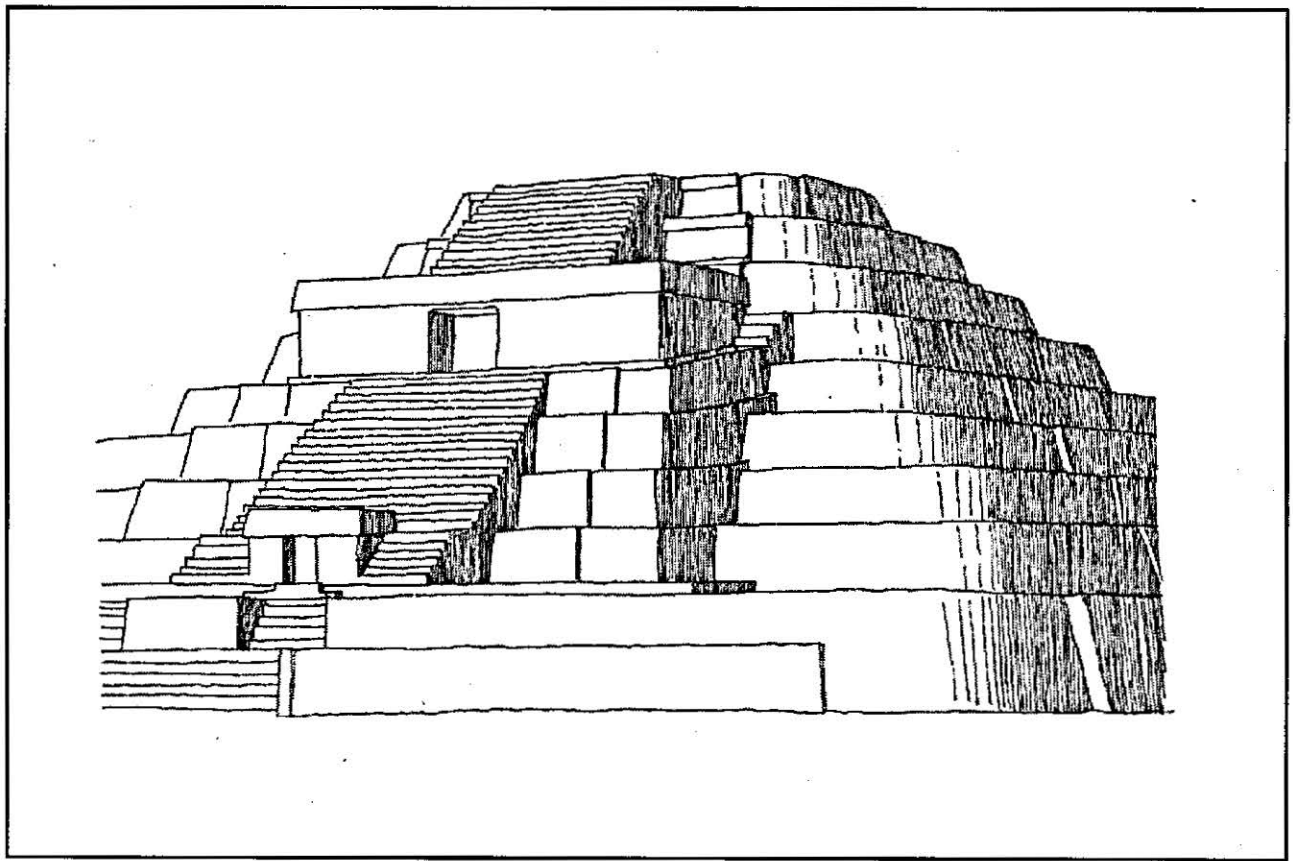


Figure 8.3 *Lamanai Structure N10-9, early Late Classic (seventh century A.D.) form.*

The Lamanai Temple: Contrasts. In the widespread Tikal format, the Building component is always positioned directly above the pyramid, and as a result, the pyramid is classified as a substructure feature. In the Lamanai Temple, the pyramid sustains the Building below its top. This turns out to be a prime diagnostic of the Lamanai Temple: a pyramid component that does not sustain a major component on its uppermost surface, and therefore is not used to elevate a Building to the maximum extent possible. In the Lamanai format, the top of the pyramid is usually, though not always, the highest element of the temple, analogous in this sense to the roof comb that often, but not always, crowns examples of Tikal format temples.

Because the Tikal format is the normal one in the Maya area, the term "temple" is often applied to the Building component only (see Andrews 1975:39), and the implied function of the pyramid is often considered to be merely that of elevating the temple to a commanding height. Although this effect is unquestionably created, a different possibility is introduced by the appearance of a pyramid that does not do this but instead reserves the most dominant, uppermost position to itself. This implies that the pyramid may have some intrinsic value or significance independent of its use as a substructure device employed to set a Building component in an elevated position. If this is true of the Lamanai Temple it may

also be true of Tikal format temples, in which this very obvious substructure role may mask the other, more fundamental one.

It can now be seen why the Magician Pyramid at Uxmal is not an example of the Lamanai Temple: it sustains a major component on its upper surface and this feature, a Building, is the highest part of the temple.

The Late Classic version of Structure N10-9 that we have just considered was a modification of an Early Classic structure (Figure 8.1) which had itself been built on top of a heavily demolished earlier fabric. There are four components: a basal platform, a pyramid, a low Building platform, and a Building. In the reconstruction the Building is shown as vaulted, but in fact there was no evidence either for or against this form. The number of front doorways is not known, and the lateral extent is also unclear. The Building as shown does not extend past the stair because surviving evidence was limited to this area. But a feature that could be the remains of a Building platform does extend farther on the west side, and hence it is possible that the Building could have been much larger (Figure 8.2).

In either case, we see a Building component set quite low in front of a pyramid that looms very much higher behind it. Even with the larger of the two possible

Building forms the pyramid is far and away the dominant feature. It has eight terraces, rounded corners, side outsets, and stair-side outsets. Apron moldings are definitely absent on terrace faces; they may have been present on side outsets but not enough material remained in place to show this. The top of the pyramid had been badly damaged by tree growth and further disturbed by a small looter's pit, but even with these problems the presence of a summit feature would have left some evidence. There was no indication of even a small platform or altar on the pyramid's top surface, which apparently was just an area large enough to permit the staging of some sort of activity.

The basal platform is somewhat problematic. It is so similar to the general form of the pyramid that one is tempted to see it as a basal terrace of a pyramid with nine terraces, but I feel that it is sufficiently differentiated from the upper terraces to indicate that it should be considered as a separate component. The stair at its front is much wider than the upper stair, and is flanked by mask panels rather than stair-side outsets; the mask panels are similarly much wider than the corresponding outsets above. It therefore seems correct to consider the component as a basal platform rather than a basal terrace; in a way, this is a little uncomfortable.

Classification of the basal feature as a separate component leaves the pyramid with only eight terraces, which makes it one of the few, if not the only, eight-terrace Maya pyramid known. Of course this does not rule out the possibility that eight terraces were indeed

intended. There even may be a complicated compound form here intended to support a dual reading as both eight terraces and nine terraces or either one, as the occasion might require. In any case, the fact that both the pyramid and the basal platform, including the mask panels, were painted monochrome red suggests that the entire assemblage was meant to be perceived as a single entity.

Acceptance of this structure as having a basal platform rather than a nine-terrace pyramid, and classification of it as an example of a Lamanai Temple, allows a formal definition, given that in this case the Building component is not actually supported on the pyramid at all. It stands in front, on a basal platform that supports both the pyramid and the Building platform. This leads to the following definition: a Lamanai Temple is a structure with a pyramid and a Building (and possibly other components), with the Building placed below the top of the pyramid, and with no Building at the pyramid summit.

It is my hope that the foregoing discussion will serve to identify new examples of Lamanai Temples both at Lamanai and elsewhere. It is not sufficient, however, to distinguish them by definition from others of similar form but different concept, as the discussion of Puuc examples, below, will show.

The Role of the Structure Top. At Palenque, one of the titles associated with the ruler Pacal is "he of the pyramid" (Kubler 1972:318; Schele 1976:12), possibly tied to a ceremony in which a member of the ruling

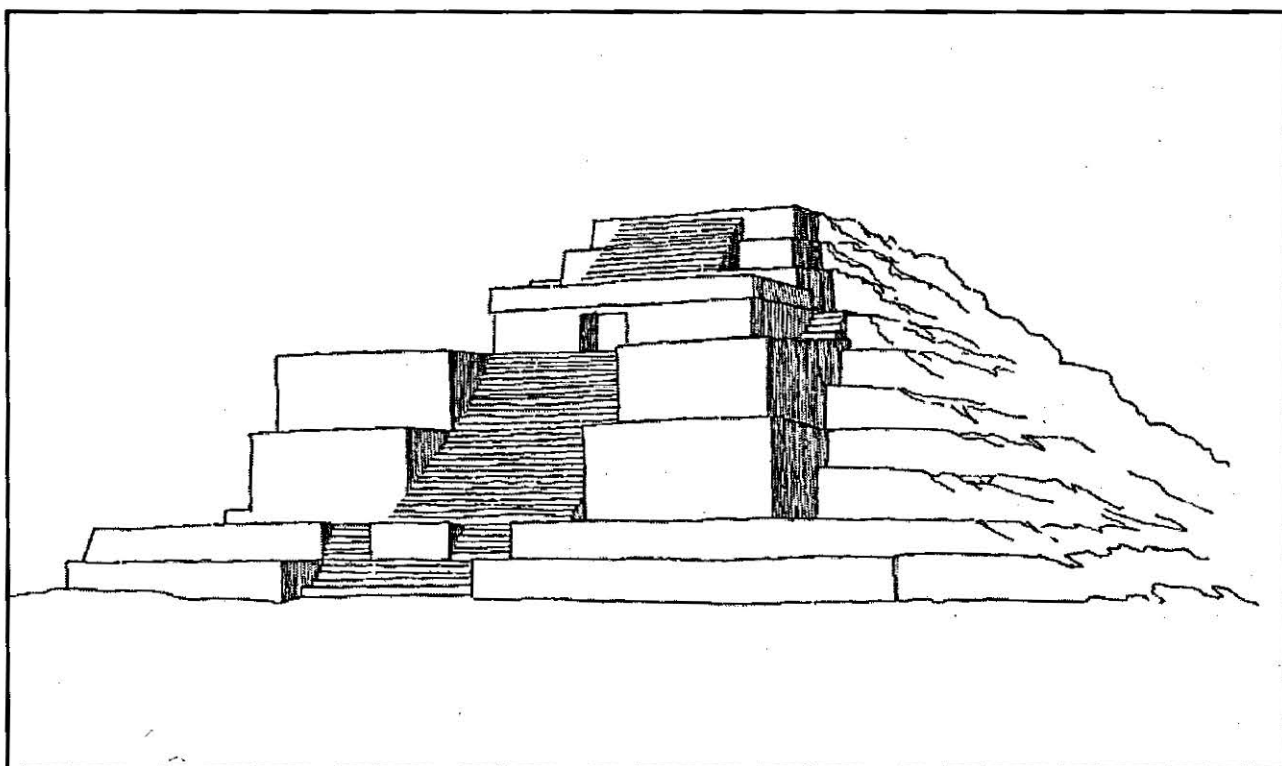


Figure 8.4 Structure N10-9, final (Early Postclassic, ca twelfth century A.D.) form.

elite appeared on a pyramid. The arrangement of N10-9 would have provided a large stage on which such a ceremony could have been performed, with the individual on the very top of the structure rather than part way up as would have been the case at Palenque and the many other sites with temples arranged in the Tikal format. Something of the sort may be implied by the final version of N10-9 (Figure 8.4), built in the early Postclassic (Pendergast 1981:44). For this structure the original Early Classic pyramid and Late Classic building were retained but new frontal terraces and new stairs were built. As in the Late Classic arrangement, the stairs rise from the roof of the Building to reach the higher top of the pyramid behind it. Again the arrangement suggests staging of activity on the pyramid top.

In the late form of N10-9 the earlier lower shrine was eliminated, and the mask panels on the front of the basal platform were covered with new, blank panels. The focus was now all on the summit. The terraces of the pyramid, on sides and rear, were left untouched,

even though they were in fairly advanced stages of disrepair; masonry of the Postclassic frontal terraces abutted core surfaces on the east side where Early Classic facings, by now at least seven centuries old, had sloughed off (or had been removed, a possibility that seems not unlikely in view of the small volume of debris). In effect, the Postclassic terracing was placed in front of a pyramid that might have looked like a natural hill, possibly covered with trees or brush. This may confirm the foregoing interpretation of the pyramid as a component conceptually distinct from the basal platform, because the latter was resurfaced whereas the former was not, and the top must have been very dramatically emphasized as a place singled out for special activity of a prominent nature.

An odd feature of Structure N10-9, in view of its commanding position and large size, is the very poor quality of its workmanship. Terrace facing stones are roughly shaped, plaster surfaces are uneven, and core masonry is quite loose. Large core aggregate consists of unmodified chert boulders in a very low grade, set

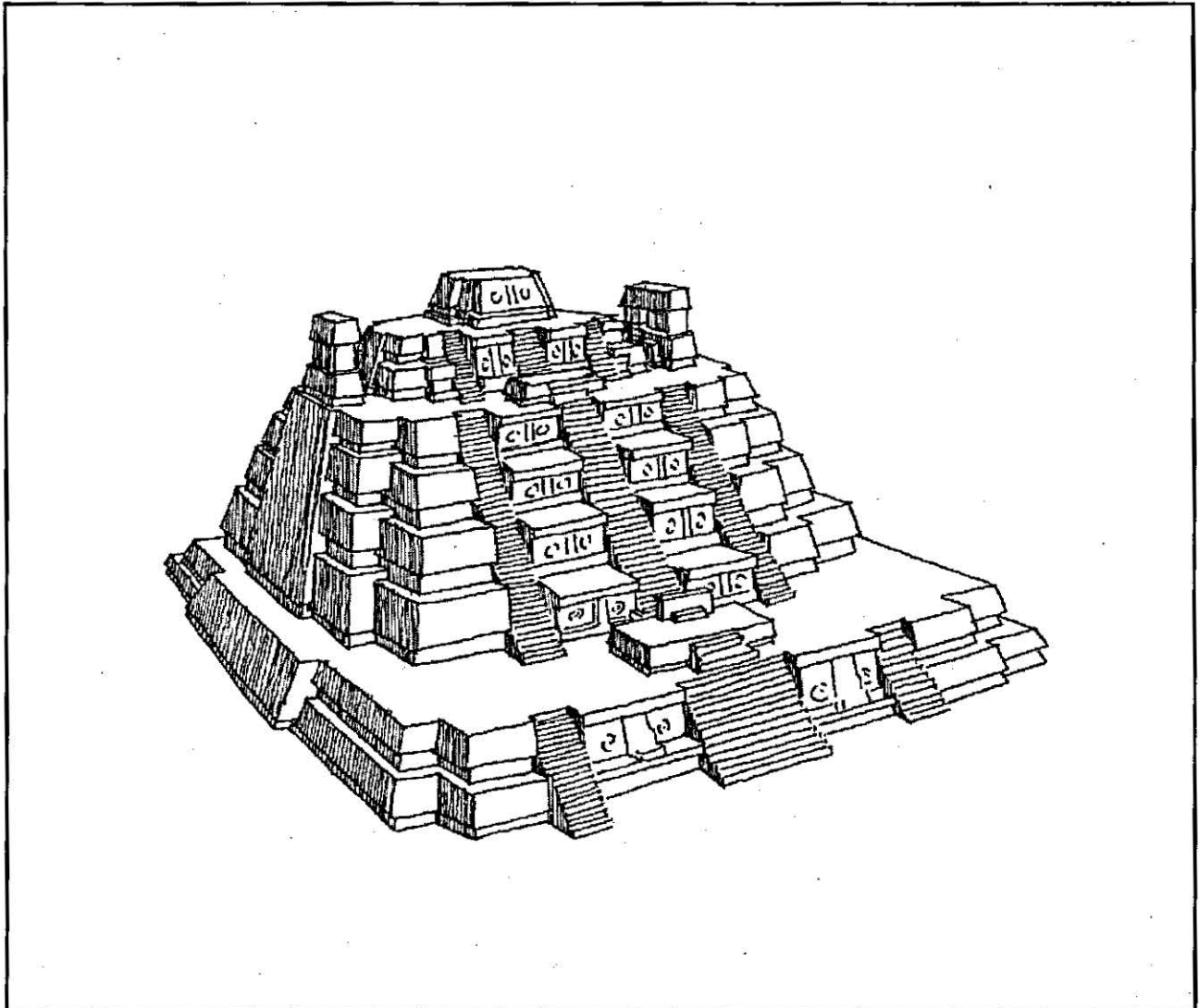


Figure 8.5 *Lamanai Structure N10-43, Late Preclassic (first century B.C.?) form.*

in an earthy matrix, grey in some task units and almost black in others, but generally not very adhesive. In these circumstances tunnels were impossible without bracing and trench sides had to be sloped back quite far for safety. Owing to the conditions it was not feasible to trench very deeply, and as a result the earlier, badly demolished structure remains largely unexplored.

Structure N10-43

The next in order of investigation was Structure N10-43, at 30 m the highest building at the site and the largest Lamanai Temple now known. As built in the Late Preclassic (Pendergast 1981:41), over an earlier quite large structure that may still survive relatively well preserved beneath it, this is the most complicated of the Lamanai Temples (Figure 8.5). Initially it had a total of ten components; a basal platform, a pyramid of three components, two building platforms, two Buildings, and two small axial platforms. The basal platform is similar to that of N10-9; it can almost be regarded as a frontally extended basal terrace, but is just different enough to qualify as a separate component. The small axial platform on the basal platform has the appearance of a Building platform, but evidence of the presence of a Building was inconclusive. The upper small axial platform also looks like a Building platform, but seems quite clearly not to have supported a Building.

The three pyramid platforms collectively make up a pyramid that rises up to an apparently inaccessible summit. The uppermost of the three is shaped like a Building platform, but its frontally extending element, which suggests a stair, may be a large mask panel. Evidence on the point is not conclusive; no mask fragments were found, and destruction from tree root action was very heavy. The two Building components on their Building platforms — which include mask panels flanking the stairs — stand on the top of the lower of these three pyramid components, and below the level reached by the triple stair system. The pyramid rises up higher than the Buildings, but as a stack of three components, not just one. Again, as in N10-9, surviving paint fragments indicate that the whole structure was painted monochrome red.

Later, probably still within the Late Preclassic, two more red painted Buildings were added (not illustrated) on the top of the second platform of the pyramid, closely flanking the central, summit platform and facing inward. They now formed the highest elements of the structure. This would weaken identification of the modified N10-43 as a true Lamanai Temple, were it not for the likelihood that the uppermost component of the pyramid may have been a large mask panel, as mentioned above. This indicates importance of the summit feature, though not as a stage for ceremonial

activity, for there is no evidence of a stair to its summit level. Ceremonial performances would have taken place in front of the mask, at the top of the triple stair system. In this version of N10-43, the top of the pyramid, given over to display of sculptural imagery, would have very strongly paralleled the roof combs that crown many Tikal-format temples.

A major renewal of the structure in Late Classic times transformed N10-43 into the best example of a Lamanai Temple to emerge so far (Figure 8.6). We now see a single long Building that would be regarded as a canonical multi-doorway palace, were it not a component of a temple. Its eleven doorways stretch all the way across the very extensive front, atop a Building platform, as well as a basal platform that also supports the pyramid behind it, just as in N10-9. The triple stair has been replaced by a wide central stair that rises to the summit, where a small platform indicates that the structure's top was the scene of some kind of activity. The pyramid is made up of two platform components. There is a fine tension between the horizontally powerful building and the vertically dominant pyramid with its great stairway rising to the summit, which now is recast as the setting for some sort of activity, presumably ceremonial.

In the renewal the upper stairs are sunk into the terraces of the pyramid and new, blank panels conceal the flanking masks in much the same way, and at roughly the same time, as on N10-9. Inset stairs like these are more typical of the Preclassic than the Late Classic, but an engineering constraint may have been at work here. The only way that a typically Late Classic outset stair could have been built on N10-43 would have been by starting it from the roof of the Building, as was done on N10-9. In N10-43 the builders chose instead to bring the pyramid stair down behind the Building as though it were accessible through rear doorways. There are no such doorways, although there is nothing obvious that would have prevented their installation. To reach the pyramid stair it is necessary to edge around the narrow space at the two ends of the Building. This seems a strange arrangement, but certainly would have the effect of restricting access to the main pyramid stair and separating events or individuals on the pyramid from those in the Building, on the stair leading up to the Building, or in the plaza out in front.

This arrangement would have allowed an "appearance" on the pyramid to be staged very dramatically. The Late Classic renewal made no use of red paint, so the rich vestments of participants, and the blood so important in ceremonies, would have stood out boldly. As first built, the temple would have made a grand,

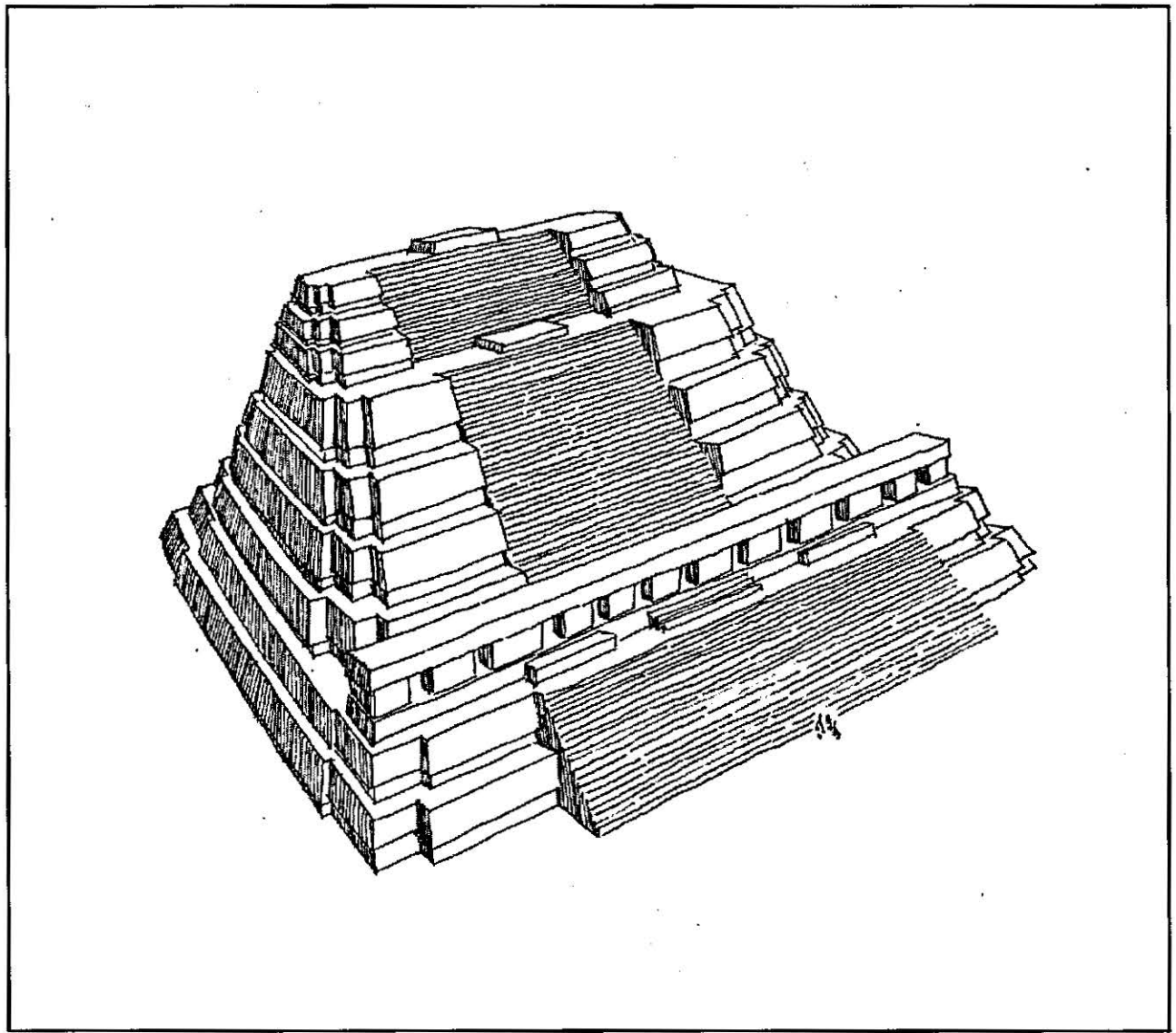


Figure 8.6 *Structure N10-43, early Late Classic (seventh century A.D.) form.*

glistening white, or perhaps silvery, show rising 30 m above the plaza. The wide single stairway on the Late Classic version of N10-43 not only suggests that the summit of the structure held a special significance, but also may indicate that the stairway itself did. Activities on the stair, and ceremonies involving vertical movement, would have been very effectively displayed in such a setting; more on this below.

It seems very clear, more so than in N10-9, that the pyramidal components must have had some value or significance of their own, and did not depend on elevating a Building to justify their existence. A final observation on N10-43: the Building of eleven front doorways results from an addition made during Late Classic times to an initial Late Classic Building of seven doorways centered on the axis of the structure. Both of these are unusual numbers of front doorways, just as pyramids of eight (N10-9) and seven (N10-43) terraces are also relatively rare in the corpus of Maya Temple architecture. Again, as in N10-9, if the basal

platform was understood as the bottom two terraces of the pyramid, as well as a conceptually distinct component, the pyramid would then be considered as an example of the more common nine-terrace type.

Structure N9-56

The third Lamanai Temple extensively excavated at Lamanai is Structure N9-56, on the edge of the New River lagoon. It is the dominant feature of a plazuela group elevated on a plazuela platform. It occupies the east side of the group, facing away from the lagoon, and incorporates a very extensive series of architectural superimpositions and modifications, running from the Late Preclassic through the Late Classic and continuing in terms of ceremonial activity into the Postclassic after the structure had partially collapsed and decayed into mound form (Pendergast 1981:51).

Here I discuss only two structures from the middle of the series; the complete series, once it is fully worked

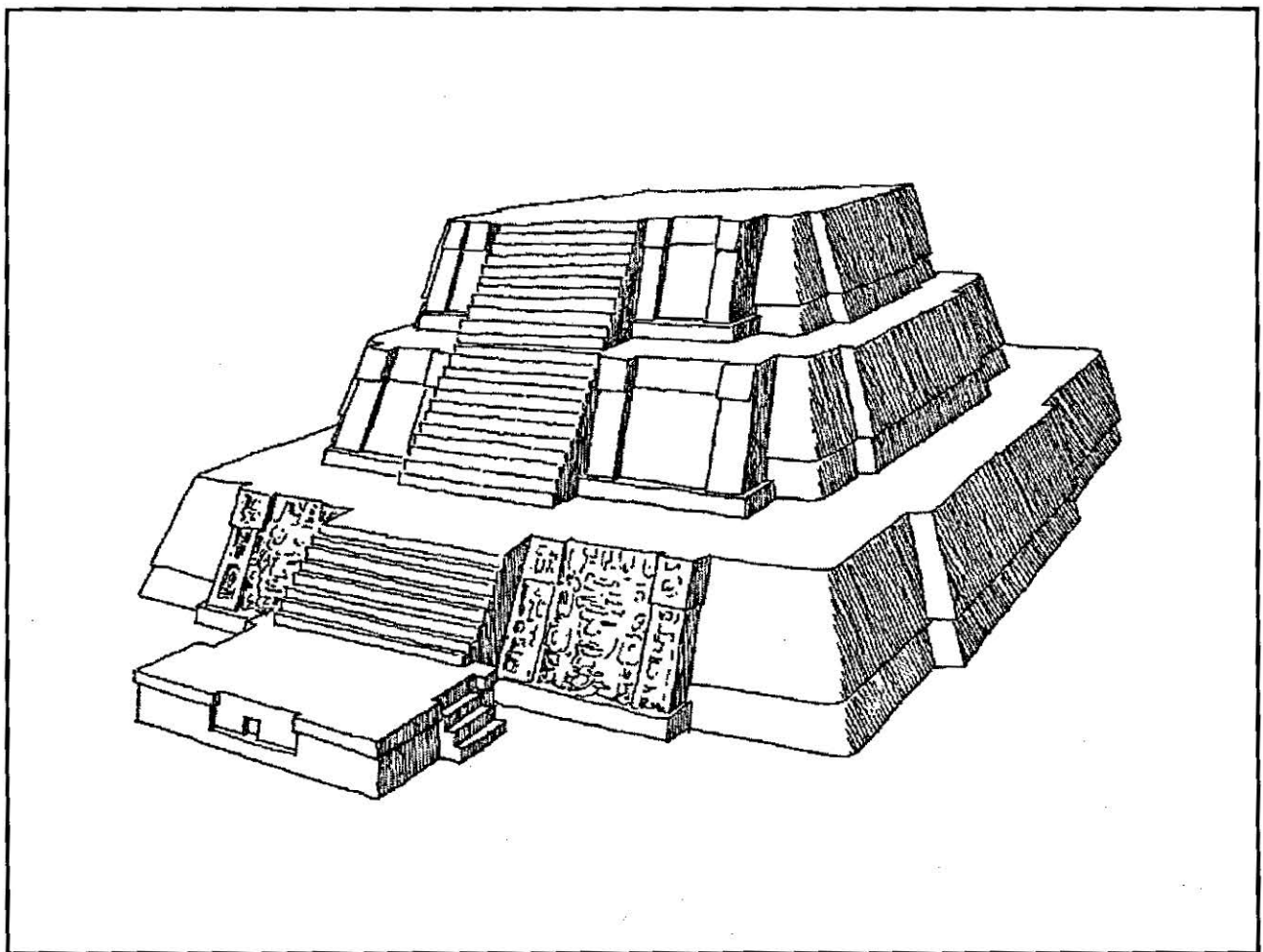


Figure 8.7 *Lamanai Structure N9-56, late Early Classic (fifth century A.D.) form.*

out, will provide several more examples of Lamanai Temples. A late Early Classic version of N9-56 (Figure 8.7), probably of the fifth century A.D., has four components; a Building platform, a Building (inferred, and not included in the illustration), a basal platform, and a pyramid. The basal platform supports the two upper terraces of the pyramid and could be regarded as a lower terrace, but is separated from the upper ones by a wider top surface and the presence of mask panels. The small Building platform in front, attached to the stair, could have supported a Building, but all traces had been obliterated by later construction activity. The assumption that a Building was present reflects the survival of Building fragments in a comparable position later in the sequence.

Once again it seems clear that the top of the pyramid is simply an open space. The masks, and probably the whole structure, were painted a dark grey, almost black. Later in the sequence, possibly in the sixth or seventh century A.D., the structure still has the same four components (Figure 8.8), with the Building now definitely present, complete with evidence for vaults. The top of the pyramid is elaborated as a minor platform component, possibly in recognition of the summit as a place where certain ceremonial activities

could be staged. In this case, in contrast with the Late Classic N10-43, the Building seems relatively insignificant, by-passed by wide lateral stairs, and the top of the pyramid appears as the major focus. Again, as in both N10-9 and N10-43, modifications in the Late Classic concealed mask panels which, on N9-56, had been extremely prominent earlier owing both to their size and to the high relief of the modelled masks.

Structure N10-27

Finally, Structure N10-27 (not illustrated), which housed Stela 9 in its building (Pendergast 1988), is the last example of a Lamanai Temple actually excavated at Lamanai, although in this case the pyramidal component was not fully investigated owing to its extensively damaged condition, possibly enhanced by facing-stone robbery in Postclassic times. The Building is placed at approximately basal platform height, and the pyramid rises behind it. Prior to excavation the structure did not appear to be a Lamanai Temple; there was no frontal bulge to suggest the presence of a Building on a basal platform. Debris bulges at the front suggest that Structures P9-21, P9-12 and P9-2 might all be Lamanai Temples. Of these, P9-2 was cleared and partially excavated on the front in the area of the central axis, but the work neither

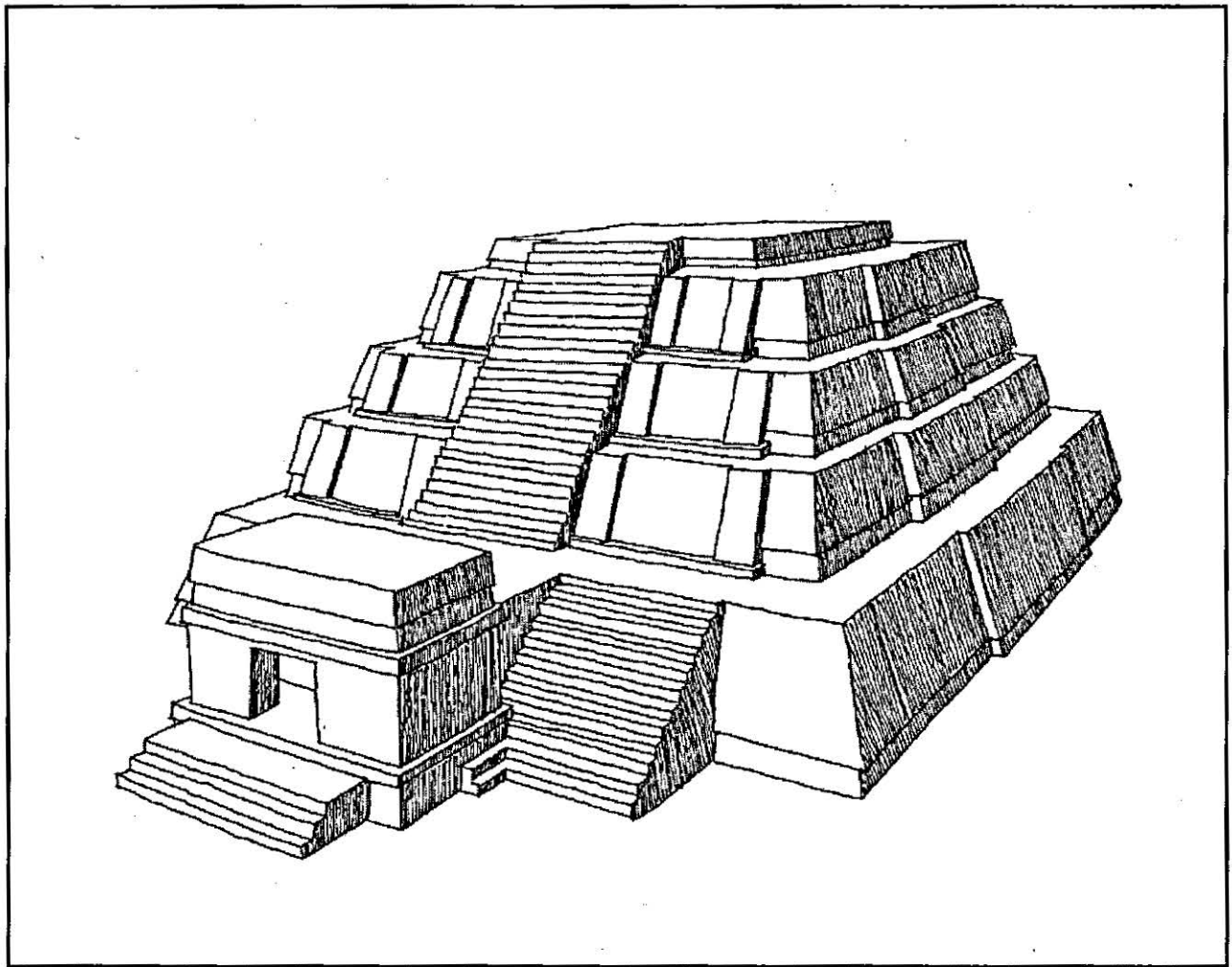


Figure 8.8 Structure N9-56, Late Classic (sixth–seventh century A.D.) form.

confirmed nor denied the suggested identification. Counting excavated examples, suspicious debris profiles, and unresolved cases in stratifications that have not been fully investigated, there are probably between ten and twenty examples of Lamanai Temples at Lamanai, and they span from the late Preclassic to the early Postclassic, with the most fully developed forms occurring in the Late Classic. In addition, in both N10-9 and N9-56 ceremonial activity continued until the Late Postclassic, on debris mounds that resembled natural hills (Loten 1985:89).

Lamanai Temples at Other Sites

Altun Ha

The best example of a Lamanai Temple not at Lamanai is Structure B-4 2nd A at Altun Ha. This was actually the first discovered, excavated by David Pendergast between 1965 and 1968 (Pendergast 1982:47–52, Figure 30). Prior to the work at Lamanai, it stood as just an isolated example of an unusual structure form. It confirms the Lamanai Temple hypothesis, that major activity was focused on the top of the pyramid, by the presence of an altar and the remains of copal incense,

carved jades, and other items burnt atop the altar and deposited around it (Pendergast 1982:73, 104–106). It is similar in form to the final, early Late Classic version of N10-43, with which it is roughly contemporaneous, with the difference that B-4 2nd A has no basal platform and is much smaller.

Kaminaljuyu

Throughout Mesoamerica there appear to be only a very few structures that have the principal features of the Lamanai Temple, and none is very similar to the examples known at Lamanai and Altun Ha. Structure B4 at Kaminaljuyu, if the projected absence of a Building at the summit is correct, provides an example quite comparable to N10-9, with a Building placed about two thirds of the way up the front. However the tablero/talud terrace profiles (Kidder et al. 1946:Figure 16) render its appearance very unlike that of N10-9 at Lamanai.

Cerros

Structure 6 at Cerros, in northern Belize (Freidel and Schele 1990:Figure 3:17), Late Preclassic, is a pyramidal temple with a small thatched Building at the middle level, and an open platform top at the upper

level. The upper two-terrace platform has elaborate masks that are interpreted as representations of the daily transit of the sun through the sky, which enabled a ruler to appear in the midst of conceptually loaded imagery (Freidel and Schele 1988:86). Because these masks appear on the upper platform, and the lower platforms are not similarly elaborated, they provide strong support for the intrinsic conceptual importance of the pyramid component, as distinct from the Building, which is very much less impressive in this particular temple.

Structure 29C at Cerros (Freidel and Schele 1990: Figure 3:23) is reconstructed without any Building component whatever; it has a format very similar to that of N10-43 at Lamanai, with the upper component flanked by inward facing ones. This is not exactly a Lamanai Temple, but it seems closely related and does serve to reinforce the same interpretation: that Maya truncated pyramids were not always simply devices used to elevate temple Buildings.

The Puuc

The only other temples remotely similar to the Lamanai Temple all appear in the Puuc region of northern Yucatan.

Uxmal. The Great Pyramid at Uxmal (Pollock 1980:Figure 426) satisfies the definition in the sense that a kind of Building component is placed just below the top of the pyramid, which appears to have been an open space. In this case, however, ranges of rooms extend around all four sides of the pyramid and there is no evident means of access to the summit.

Structure 6 of the North Group, Uxmal (Pollock 1980: Figure 395), is similar except that rooms extend around only the north, east and west sides, so that on the south front only the narrow ends of the east and west ranges are visible. This certainly fits the Lamanai Temple model in the sense that the pyramid top was not just accessible, but very conspicuously so. According to Morley's plan, cited by Pollock (1980:Figure 389), there may have been a north stair, and if so, from that side the structure would have had the appearance of a Lamanai Temple, except that access to the summit may not have been visible.

The small Temple of the Columns at Uxmal, just west of the Nunnery Quadrangle (Pollock 1980:Figure 224/230), is another somewhat similar example, with a stair rising up at the rear of a building, to give access to an elevated stage or surface at roof level. In this case, though, there is no real pyramid component.

Other Puuc Sites. A structure mapped by Maler at Chacbolay (Pollock 1980:Figure 588) presents another example in the same general format as the Great

Pyramid and Structure 6 of the North Group at Uxmal. Rooms are arranged in a quadrangle, facing out, the center area (where the courtyard would be) filled solid, and a stair gives access to the elevated upper surface. Maler's section indicates only the stair, but suggests enough height to allow for a low pyramidal substructure. The center area at the top could be understood as the top of the pyramid even though much of the apparent height seems to be taken up by the Building component. In other words, the form may not be very pyramidal, but may still fit the Lamanai Temple format.

Structure 2C6 at Kabah (Pollock 1980:Figure 281), the famous Codz Poop, is essentially the same arrangement but here there is no pyramidal component and no evident means of access to the upper surface provided by the solid inner element. Nevertheless, the format results in an upper surface, above the Building level, where activities could have taken place.

Structure A12 at Kabah (Pollock 1980:Figure 290) provides a nice comparison with N10-43 at Lamanai. It has a seven-doorway range-type structure on its own substructure platform connecting behind to a pyramid whose top is accessible by a lateral stair. In this structure, there may be a basal platform sustaining both the Building and the pyramid.

Structure 2 at Kiuc (Pollock:Figure 592), about 11 km south of Labna, might be a very good example of the Lamanai Temple format. It has a pyramidal form with a Building placed on a basal level on the west side. It has never been excavated, so there could be another Building at the top of the pyramid, which would rule it out as a Lamanai Temple, and there may or may not be a stair rising to the summit.

Possible Additional Belize Examples

Debris profiles suggest that Caracol Structures B10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 36 and 37, as well as Structures A4, 5, 6, and 7, (Chase and Chase 1987:Figure 47) may well turn out to be Lamanai Temples. Finally, a Lamanai Temple has reportedly been discovered recently by Anne Pyburn at Chau Hiix, which lies between Altun Ha and Lamanai and links the two in other cultural spheres besides the architectural (David Pendergast, personal communication 2001).

The foregoing are all the examples of Lamanai Temples that I have been able to find at sites other than Lamanai and Altun Ha. They number less than the total present at Lamanai, and are rather different in form even though they satisfy the strict letter of the definition. It seems fairly clear that the Lamanai Temple was a type of ceremonial structure erected at Lamanai and nearby Altun Ha, and possibly at the

intervening Chau Hiix, and not much utilized elsewhere. In this sense it is similar to the Tikal Temple, which, though quite different in form, was likewise restricted in association to a very limited number of sites. The examples from northern Yucatan reviewed above probably represent the conceptual significance of the pyramid rather than any association with Lamanai or northern Belize.

The Significance of the Maya Temple

That Lamanai, Tikal, and Chichen Itza present us with distinctive temple types not widely used elsewhere in the Maya world may indicate that these sites were involved in some unusual kind of ceremonial performance, or that the structures are unusual treatments of a setting for activities essentially common to most Maya centers. The first alternative is difficult to assess because we hardly know with any precision what activities actually took place in temples, and certainly do not know what roles individual components may have played. The second, I believe, has considerable potential.

It seems to me that there is usually a significant degree of freedom between architectural form and the functional requirements of buildings. It is certainly true that some forms of architecture can greatly inhibit or even prevent some kinds of functions. It is also true, however, that most functions can be effected perfectly well in a very wide range of formally different settings. I suspect that the actual range of such possibilities may be much wider than is generally thought, because only a very few such alternatives are ever actually realized.

A temple form established early in the development of a site may well inhibit the range of alternatives investigated by builders of later temples. Indeed, the very essence of what a temple is, as not merely the setting for ceremonial activities but also the manifestation of the supernatural presence with which the ceremonies seek to communicate, may tend to inhibit further experimentation with architectural form once a satisfactory form has been realized. Acceptance of a particular form and order for a temple as the correct one may make it very difficult to introduce others.

Nevertheless, even the most cursory look at Maya temple architecture reveals that temple forms tended to evolve over time and to vary from place to place. It appears from this that there was room for a degree of invention and innovation within the range of forms that could be accepted as proper and appropriate for Maya temples. The extent and configuration of the variation in the corpus of Maya pyramidal temples is a subject

for another day, but in this setting the differing treatment of the pyramidal component in Lamanai and Tikal temples may briefly suggest the scope of such an analysis.

The Temple as a Mountain

The idea of pyramids as references to natural mountains is well developed in Maya iconography (Broda 1987; Pasztory 1983; Freidel and Schele 1989:233, 241–242). The architectural historian Kostof (1985:21) has proposed that natural landforms such as mountains were very widely interpreted, prior to the development of temple architecture, as places of supernatural power — places where supernatural beings could be confronted and contacted through rituals intended to reinforce the belief in actual supernatural presence.

Kostof does not develop this idea. My extension of his insight is that it is very likely that certain mountains would have been selected as places of power as a result of their natural attributes of form and order, and their context. That is, the structure of natural formal relationships existing within a landform had the effect of drawing attention to one particular natural feature, such as, for example, isolating one particular mountain among others. This effect results from the natural architecture of landform. It is the phenomenon behind the romantic movement in European landscape painting and the search for the sublime by American and European nineteenth-century intellectuals and artists — an idea admittedly a little remote from the Prehispanic Maya, but not on that account something beyond their possible awareness. If this kind of sensibility actually worked for the ancient Maya, the building of pyramidal temples could be seen as a process of strengthening and clarifying a particular property of certain natural features through artificial structures. The structures would thereby possess exactly the same fundamental significance as a natural landform; that is, as places of supernatural power where invisible forces could be confronted and supplicated.

In the natural feature, attribution of a supernatural presence is not at all symbolic; the supernatural is considered literally to be present. It is possible that the same signification obtained for pyramidal temples. It may be that these structures subsequently emerged as the centers of settlements because they functioned as places of power, not merely on a symbolic level but on an operational level engaged with actual power, both religious and political. The pyramidal temple, then, would have had as its primary purpose the incorporation of a form in order to possess the real significance attributed to certain natural features of landform. The evidence suggests that the pyramidal component could be combined with other components

of temples in a variety of ways, but thus far it appears that the Maya only extensively explored two, the Lamanai and Tikal formats.

Of course architectural treatments entirely different from the pyramidal form could have operated as other strategies aimed at the same result — to secure the presence of real supernatural power through both architectural form and figural elaboration in paint and sculpture, all of which could work on symbolic levels as well as on literal ones.

The Temple as a Vertical Stage

Another line of interpretation may develop around the implications of vertical movement in ceremonial activity. Sahagun describes the ritual of Panquetzalixtli on the Mexican temple, in which a crucial element is the descent of the fire serpent/sword, the Xiucoatl, of Huitzilopochtli (Matos Moctezuma 1987:141). This is one example of a ritual in which vertical movement was vital, and would have benefited greatly from the presence of a high stairway as a stage for its enactment. Considering this Mexica ritual, the major one in the ceremonial year, one could well imagine that pyramidal components had developed vertically in response to an emerging perception of the advantage for staging provided by a high stairway. Such a development would, of course, not preclude the possibility that the pyramid also embodied real supernatural power, as a replication of natural places of power.

Obviously I do not mean to imply that Xiucoatl rituals took place in Maya temples; but vertical movement may well have had its own place in Maya ceremonial. The Lamanai Temple may actually provide the evidence for this in a way that is somewhat clearer than in the Tikal Temple. The pyramid glyph referred to above in connection with the Palenque texts (glyph T 685) shows a pyramid of two or three terraces with a central stair. Michael Closs (personal communication 1999) advises me that Justeson (1984:351) has proposed a reading of this glyph as both “mul-nah” meaning “pyramid” and “k’ul-nah” meaning “temple.” The glyph consists of a pyramid image without any Building on its top. This may imply that the essence of the temple was, indeed, the pyramidal component. In the Aztec realm, Van Zantwijk (1981) cites interpretations of the pyramid temple, obtained from Nahuatl literature, as a mapping of cosmology, and again the focus is on the pyramidal component, not on the summit Building.

The Temple as the Seat of Power

I am inclined to think that temple pyramids have been wrongly interpreted quite frequently as symbolic elements when their true significance may have been as features that incorporated real power. If so, they may

not in fact refer symbolically to mountains but may actually appropriate the real power resident in sacred mountains. They would not have been seen, then, as substitutes for the real thing, but as the real thing itself. In this way, enactment of the Xiucoatl ritual would have had all the direct, dramatic and dangerous implications of the mythic original act on Coatepetl itself. This, I submit, is what would have justified the enormous material and labour cost of erecting high pyramidal temples. Within this frame there could have been room for variation in the way that the stairs ran up the structure; on the one hand, a high substructure pyramid that raised the Building above the vertical drama (the Tikal format), or on the other, a stair extending above the Building to the very top of the pyramid to provide a backdrop specifically designed for vertically moving ritual (the Lamanai format).

In some conquest accounts (Díaz del Castillo 1956 [1632]:20; *Relaciones de Yucatán* 1900:24) the extant remains of pyramidal temples are referred to as “Cus,” apparently interchangeable with the Maya word “k’u,” which I understand to mean “god” (Tozzer 1941:106), or as I prefer, “supernatural power.” This suggests not only that the pyramidal component might have been the essence of the temple, but further, that it could also have been understood as the supernatural being or power itself, as some writers imply by the term “living mountain” (Freidel and Schele 1990:71–72).

Conclusions

The Lamanai, Tikal, and Chichen Itza temple formats appear very likely to have been particularly successful experiments in temple architecture at these sites, successful in the various senses suggested above, as effective stages for ceremonial performances and as convincing embodiments of supernatural power, mediated by local dynastic lineages. Once established, they continued to be used, with modifications, in later temples at the same sites and at a few other sites with which the main centers were related. Excavation at other sites may show that recurring distinctive attributes of architectural form in temples is not as much confined to these three sites as presently appears to be the case. Alternatively, we may find that in fact few other sites developed comparably distinctive temple formats or used them in ways analogous to emblem glyphs. It may be that, at other sites, early experiments in temple form simply did not result in very striking or distinctive solutions that had the capacity to function as site and dynastic emblems. In such cases, there would not have been a comparable pressure to continue employing an already established format, and builders of subsequent temples would have had the freedom to venture into new experiments.

The whole subject of architectural form in Maya temples is one that remains relatively undeveloped and seems difficult to pursue except through a highly speculative mode of inquiry. The evidence required for such an inquiry is hard to discern even though it may be directly in front of us. The nature of the temple, and the intentions of Maya temple designers, are fields ripe for reflection and theoretical modelling. Some scholars have already opened it up (Ashmore 1992), but much remains to be done. The Lamanai and Tikal temple formats themselves, if they really do reflect broad Maya architectural concepts, need a great deal more explication than I have been able to muster here.

As the Panquetzalixtli ceremony shows, and as common sense implies, successful architectural ideas effectively embody powerful cultural ideals. The treatment of pyramids in Tikal and Lamanai temples may represent particularly successful architectural ideas that embodied the myths and beliefs of their people in different ways, and provided dramatic

staging for ritual activity. If so, many other aspects of temple form surely have similar significance. The challenge of Maya temple design must have been that of finding the right form for the rich and colorful mythology that sustained the civilization. It may even be that the Mayas' success in architecture contributed to their development of urban centers and state systems. The challenge for us is to find the Maya ideals through analysis of their structures, even though we may never be able to know with certainty that we have succeeded, and we may recast what we find somewhat in our own terms. This is the very search that Hal Ball so greatly relished in his long engagement with Maya sites and archaeological projects.

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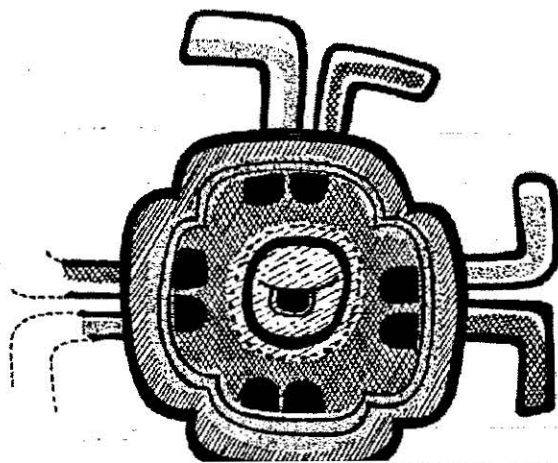
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