

More Inclusive Public Activities? Cultural Shifts in the 'Ottawa' N10[3] Palace Group, Lamanai, Belize

Karen Pierce¹ and Elizabeth Graham²

Lamanai Archaeological Project¹, Institute of Archaeology/University College London²



ABSTRACT

The Maya site of Lamanai in northern Belize exemplifies one of the longer occupation spans in the Maya Lowlands—continuously inhabited from the Preclassic (ca. 1500 B.C.) through the Spanish and British colonial periods (post A.D. 1540). The N10[3] architectural group (Ottawa), located in the Central Precinct of Lamanai, has been interpreted as a 'palace' group of significance due to its lengthy occupation span and its location adjacent to two important ceremonial plaza groups. During the Late to Terminal Classic period (A.D. 624–962 at Lamanai), the Ottawa Group underwent a major architectural transformation, which may be an indication of changing functions and strategies on the part of Lamanai elites. During the massive remodeling some masonry structures were razed and replaced with wood buildings while others, such as Structure N10-15, continued to be remodeled in masonry. Here the architectural sequence of Structure N10-15 is examined in conjunction with the caching patterns present throughout the different architectural stages. When considered together, the architectural changes at Structure N10-15 and associated changes in cache composition and placement may signal a shift in emphasis away from exclusive elite-led activities associated with divine kingship toward those of a more inclusive and public nature.

METHODS

Research Question: Do changing architectural and caching features of Structure N10-15 at the centrally located N10[3] architectural group reflect ideological changes at Lamanai during the Late to Terminal Classic period that relate to Lamanai's occupation continuity?

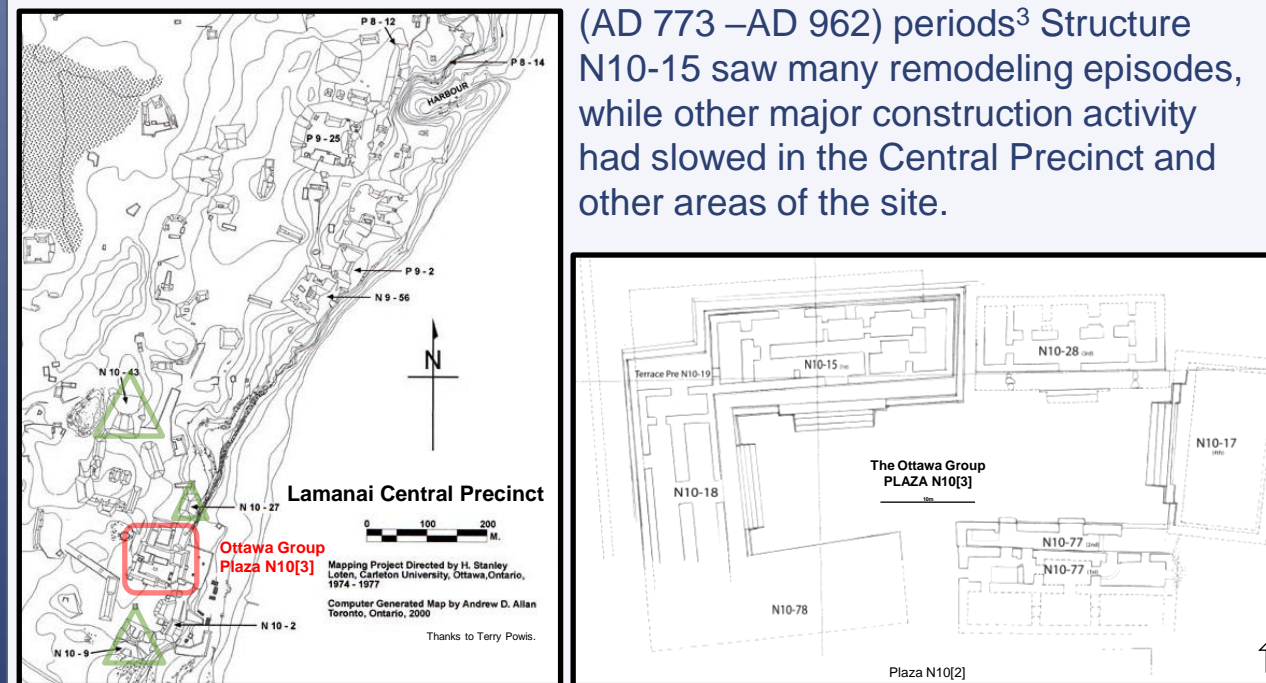
The purpose of this research is to assess whether there was *qualitatively meaningful and visually expressive ideological change* at Lamanai during the Late to Terminal Classic period by examining the architecture and associated caches of Structure N10-15 in the Ottawa Group.

The method of investigation included these main steps:

1. Assessment of the architectural features of Str. N10-15
2. Determining the architectural sequence of Str. N10-15
3. Analyzing the placement of caches in the architectural sequence
4. Contextualizing results against what is known about elite residential/administrative/civic architecture

CONTEXT & DATING

The Ottawa Group, Plaza N10[3], is situated between three large pyramidal structures in the Classic period Central Precinct—clearly an important architectural complex for the ruling elite of Lamanai. It is thought to have functioned as an elite-residential-administrative group¹, which also may be seen as a palace². During the Late (AD 624 – AD 773) and Terminal Classic (AD 773 – AD 962) periods³ Structure N10-15 saw many remodeling episodes, while other major construction activity had slowed in the Central Precinct and other areas of the site.

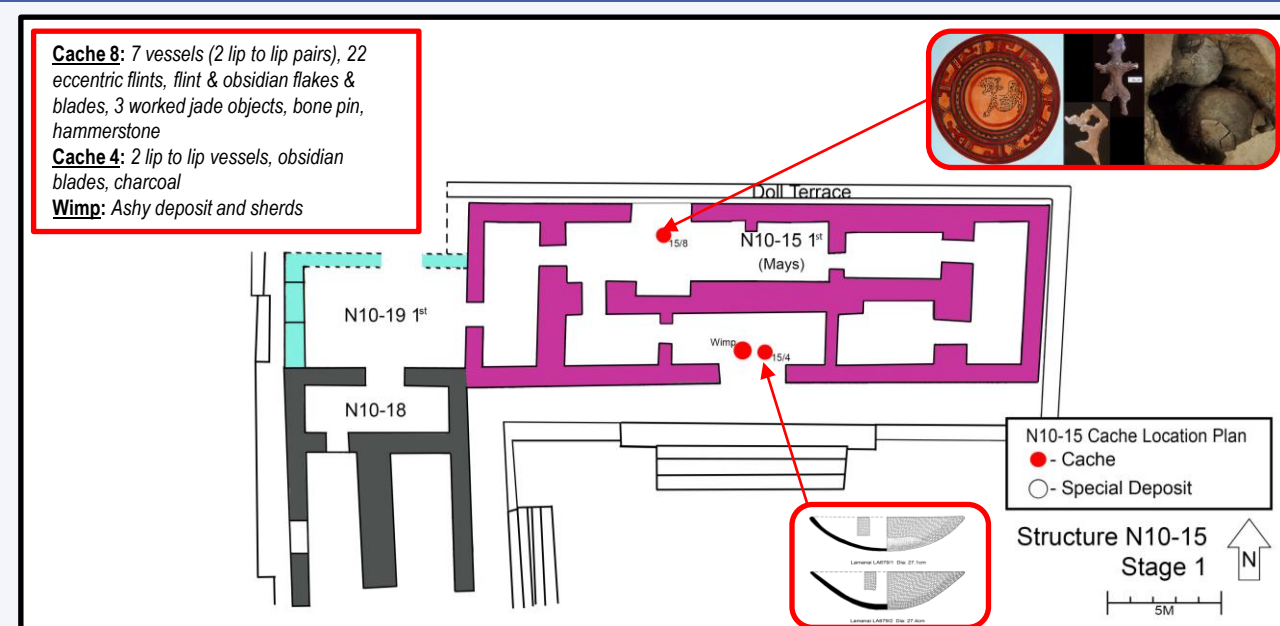


RESULTS

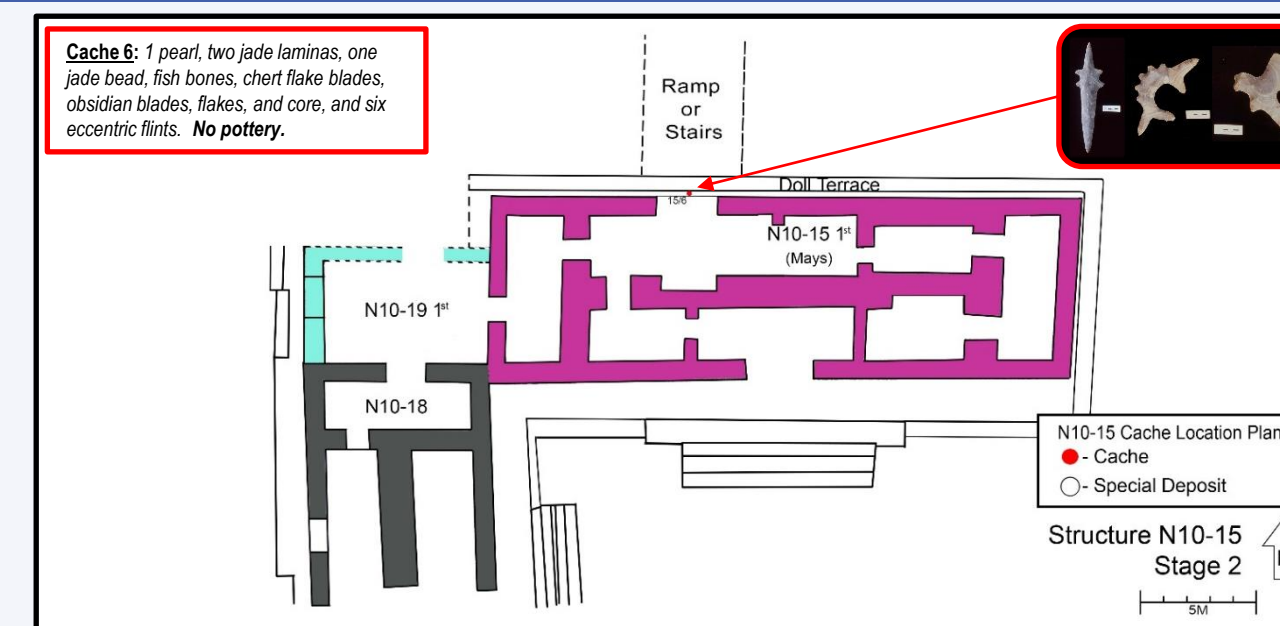
Architectural Sequence Summary. In the Late Classic, the Ottawa Group was composed of six range structures situated around a courtyard, but through time the Group was dramatically reshaped. This research has identified seven architectural stages at Structure N10-15, with additions built both to the north (Structure N10-15 2nd) and to the west, as other changes were taking place throughout Ottawa. At the end of this transformation the Ottawa Group courtyard was filled and the 'new' buildings were all sitting at the same level on a single elevated grand platform that was approximately 70 m in length by 45 m wide with a variable height of about 3.5 to 4 meters above the plaza below.

Cache Sequence Summary. All known caches encountered in Structure N10-15 date to the Late Classic to Terminal Classic. The most elaborate caches were found on the northern primary axis of Structure N10-15 1st in the central door area of that structure. Caches N10-15/6 and 15/8 are on the primary axis of Structure N10-15 1st and have a clear association with the institution of divine kingship^{4,5}. Through time some caches, such as the lip-to-lip variety, exhibit continuity with earlier cache types, while other caches are located *outside* the building and contents change to include new vessel forms and vessels exhibiting pre-interment breakage¹², with a marked absence of prestige items.

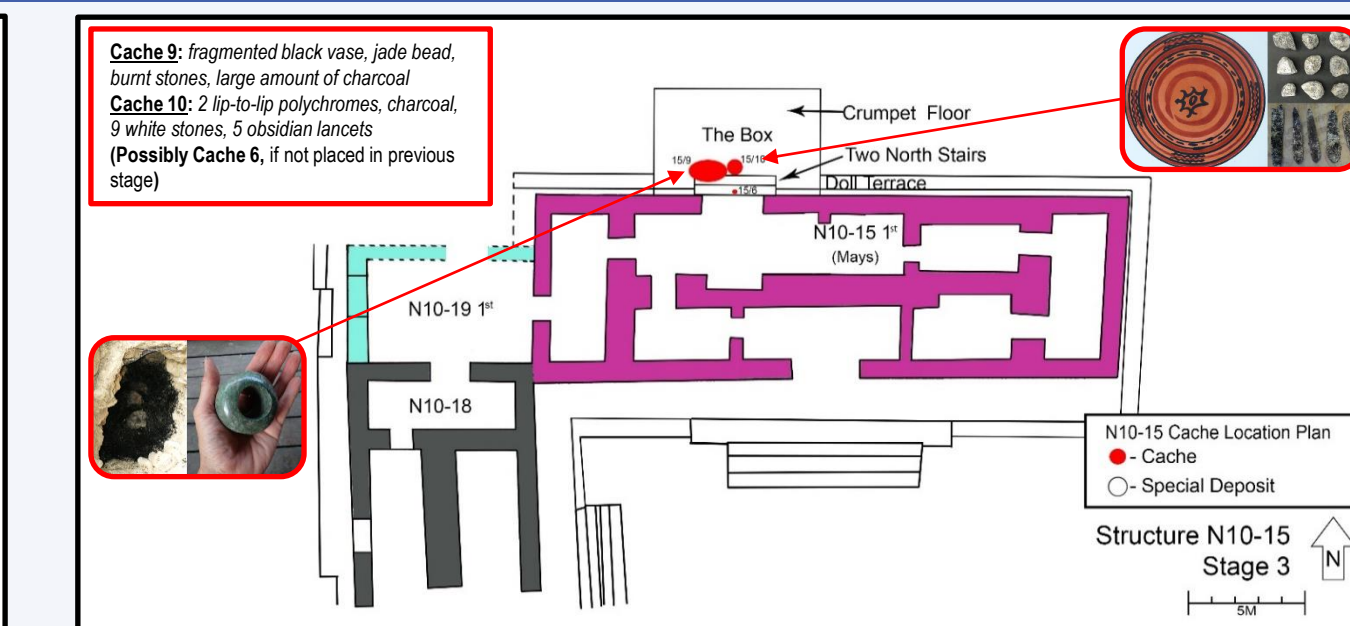
ARCHITECTURAL STAGES OF STRUCTURE N10-15



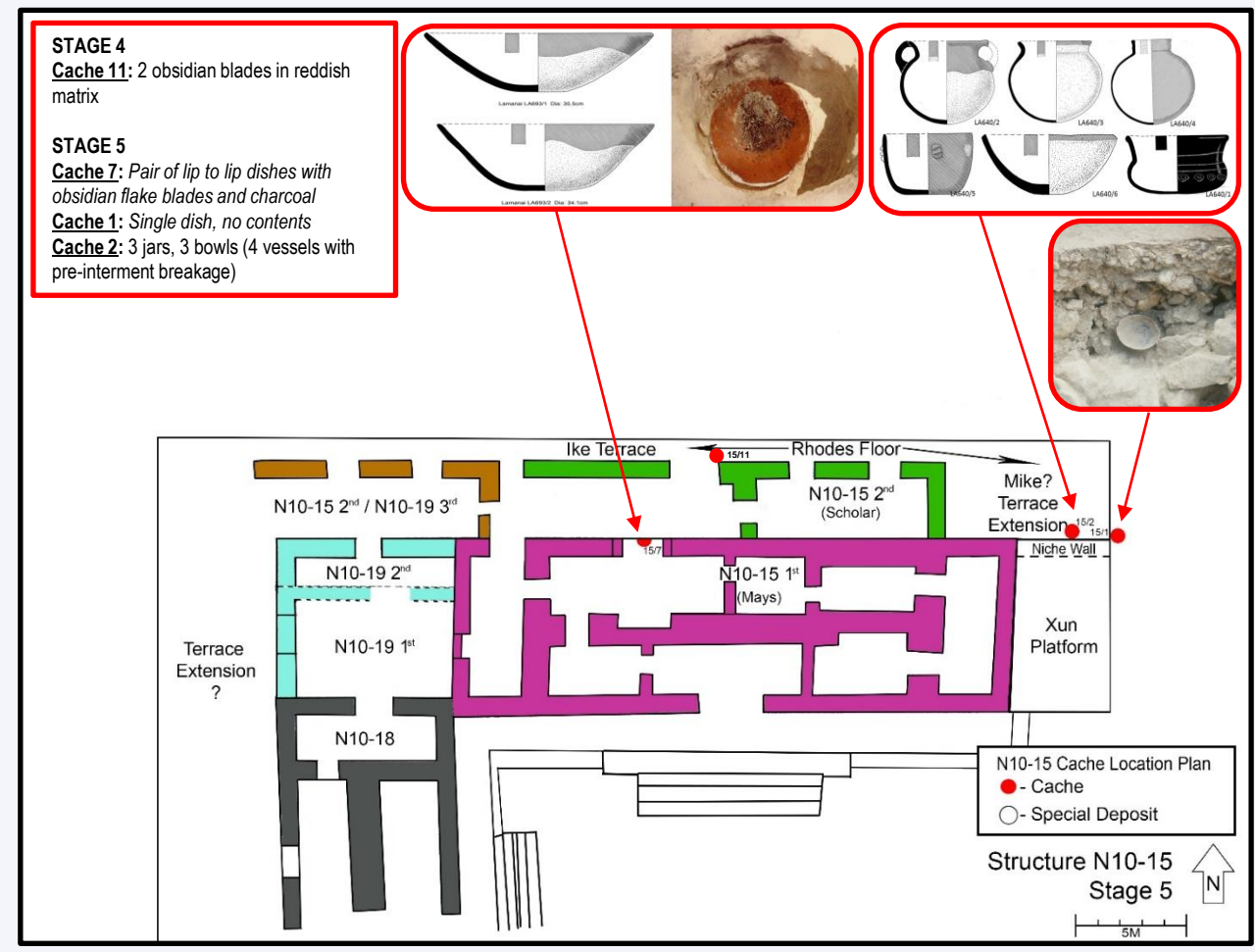
Architectural Stage 1: the primary building, Structure N10-15. **Caches:** Cache 8 is the primary cache of the building and it is the most elaborate. It contained seven vessels, one of which was a polychrome vessel with jaguar imagery associated with the Jaguar God of the Underworld^{6,8}, along with a number of chert eccentrics, other prestige items, and obsidian implements suggesting blood sacrifice. The presence of the jaguar imagery in conjunction with other elite paraphernalia associates this building with Maya rulership.



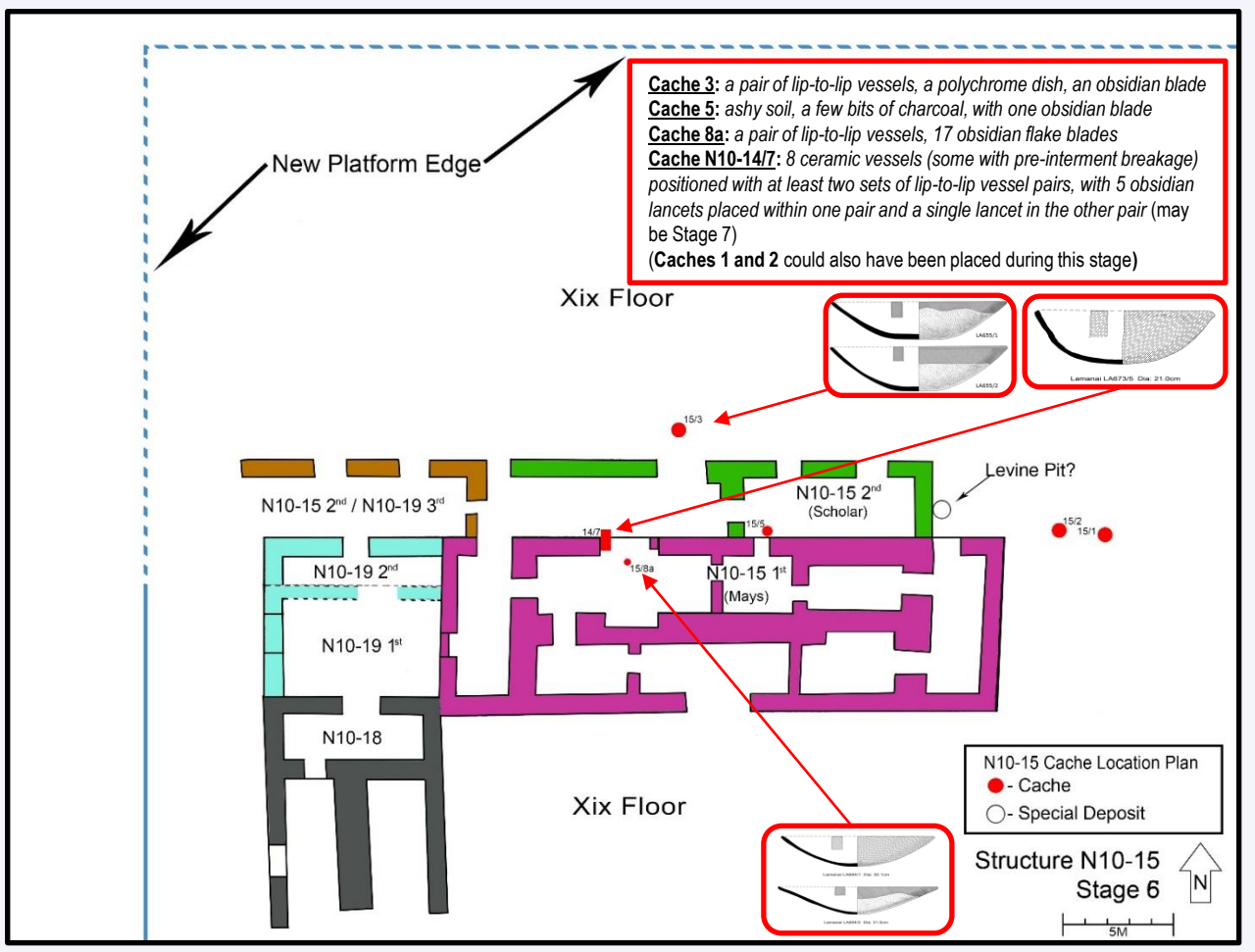
Architectural Stage 2: the addition of a ramp or stair feature on the north central axis, which overlaid the substructure of Structure N10-15. **Caches:** Cache 6 lacked pottery vessels, but contained chert eccentrics, along with other prestige items including jade, pearl, and obsidian implements. At least one of the chert eccentrics has been interpreted as a staff end, and the chert axe form is associated with the *k'awil* character—both are symbols tied to divine kingship and elite rulership.



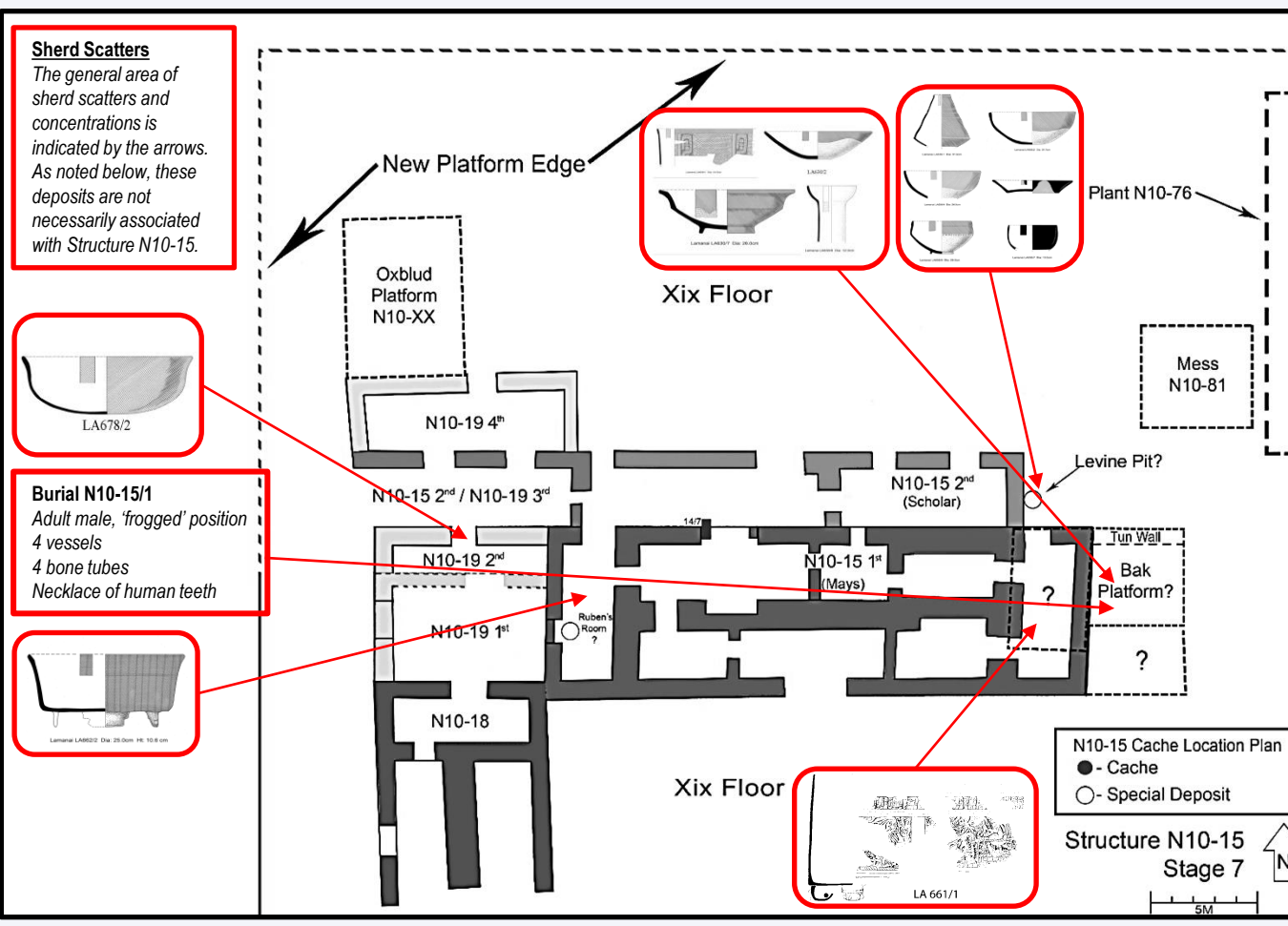
Architectural Stage 3: the addition of an 8 meter wide box-like platform covering the ramp/stair feature, with two steps connecting it to the central north door of Structure N10-15. **Caches:** Cache 10, a lip-to-lip cache, can be interpreted as a 3-layered representation of the cosmos type of cache^{7,8}, and it too contains a polychrome vessel; however, the imagery is more abstract than the jaguar vessel in Cache 8. Lip-to-lip caches occur throughout the first six stages of the architectural sequence and it may be that the other lip-to-lip caches represent the cosmos too, but are a variant. Cache 9 entailed the placement of a large mass of charcoal with a fragmented tall cylindrical vessel and one jade 'bead', which may be associated with a ritual fire ceremony⁹ that may simultaneously mark termination and dedication¹⁰.



Architectural Stages 4 & 5: the addition of another linear set of rooms across the north side of Structures N10-15 and N10-19, designated as Structure N10-15 2nd and N10-19 3rd. **Caches:** Cache 1 was a single vessel in boulder-like core, which could either represent the 'Boulders phase' or boulder core material placed for other construction. Cache 2 comprised six vessels of forms different than the previous cache vessel forms—some of which exhibited pre-interment breakage¹¹—introducing a new type of cache. These caches were placed *outside* the building! **Note:** The Stage 4 plan (the foundations of the Stage 5 expansion), is omitted for brevity.



Architectural Stage 6: a major change to the whole of Ottawa occurred around the end of the 8th century³. This monumental construction effort entailed the filling of the entire plaza area to the north (and west) and the courtyard to the south with large boulders topped by a new floor (Xix), to bring it nearly level with the interior floor surfaces of Structure N10-15. The three buildings on the east side of the Ottawa complex were demolished and the passageway from Plaza N10[2] was closed and filled. Structures N10-15/19 and N10-18 were likely still in use with this new floor, but for how long is unknown. **Caches:** Cache 3 was typical of earlier caches with lip-to-lip vessels, but was placed *outside* the building at the new north central axis of N10-15 2nd, which had shifted east with this building addition. Of note, Cache 8a was an intrusion into the earlier Cache 8.



Architectural Stage 7: represents all subsequent constructions on top of the new plaza floor. Because new structures were constructed of perishable materials on low masonry platforms—sometimes made of crude uncut stones—there is often only scant evidence for their existence, and the layering of building-atop building has complicated matters further, such that it is difficult to disentangle these latter constructions and time periods. It is unclear when Structure N10-15 ceased to exist, but all or part of it eventually became a platform supporting a perishable structure. **Caches:** There are a number of scatters and concentrations of ceramic sherds and one burial in and around Structure N10-15, or what remained of it—many of the sherds were found in post-abandonment debris. It is unclear which buildings these deposits are associated with, as some of them may be intrusions from new perishable structures erected upon a demolished and filled Structure N10-15. Pre-interment breakage, whether deliberate or accidental, is evident in the deposits, hence the pottery illustrations depict 'reconstructions' of the vessels based on the sherds.

CONCLUSIONS

- Multiple episodes of ideological change throughout N10-15 sequence
- Structure N10-15 initially linked to divine kingship/performance
- Initial caches were 'kingly', followed by many linked to bloodletting and cosmology, followed by the introduction of pre-interment breakage of many cache and special deposit vessels
- Both the architecture and caches exhibit some continuity through time, with changes seen in the introduction of new cache-vessel forms and practices, and a reshaping of the Ottawa platform with greater public accessibility
- Terminal Classic a time of increased trade, mobility, warfare, new religion
- Alternate worldview shaping new practices?

The changes through the architectural stages suggest that the socio-political situation in the Late to Terminal Classic period at Lamanai was strong enough to support a continuous building effort here, and one—in the final stages—that took an enormous amount of resources and labor. The willingness to make this type of change to the royal compound may signal an ideological change that helped Lamanai keep pace with a changing world.

The transformation of the Ottawa complex that occurred as the outcome of the boulder infilling—with Structure N10-15 now sitting level with an open plaza area—may have resulted in much greater public access to the buildings situated upon this now grand single-platform^{4,12}. Certainly not the only innovations at Lamanai, but a move to inclusivity may have contributed to Lamanai's persistence while other sites were being abandoned. In the later architectural stages of Structure N10-15 dynastic or divine rulership is being downplayed, as the public aspects of divine performance requirements of the ruler have diminished or disappeared from both the architecture and caches.

By its very nature this research, with a focus on the socio-political center of Lamanai, fails to directly include the commoner, although the changes identified may be the indirect result of elite-commoner negotiation. It is possible that both Lamanai elites and non-elites negotiated for a change to the sociopolitical system and that a restructuring was mutually beneficial. The visual expression of the architectural modifications through N10-15's history ultimately broadcast a very different message than it had when the primary building was built.

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