

Death comes to every king. When it happens, a period of turbulence or crisis ensues, no matter the time or context. Governance may rupture and questions of succession and inheritance arise. Even in systems of semi-divine rulership, where kings arrogate sacred roles and identities, a faint degree of doubt develops (Houston and Stuart 1996:289). How can a being so powerful, so marked by special attributes, die like any other human? What does this weakness say about the grandiose claims of kingship? All such matters condense into the deathways of monarchs: the preparation, processing, and interment or disposal of their bodies, the beliefs that attend the passage to other states—final, absolute oblivion seems not to have been an option—and what those who come after do out of piety or self-interest. The passing of kings has large risks for the living. They are the ones who must work at explaining why rulers die and how that transition is both meaningful and supportive of the institution. Death is a matter that touches all. It relates to broader symbolic and social themes of “loss, souls, grieving, rebirth, fertility, gender, pollution and danger, life cycles, the negation of time, and the problem of succession” (Houston et al. 2006:114; also Bloch and Parry 1982:7, 11; Huntington and Metcalf 1979:153). As event and process, it demands notice and long reflection.

The deathways of Maya royalty are well studied (Fitzsimmons 2009), as are the means by which the placement of royal and other bodies establishes deep roots (McAnany 1995, 1998). There is variety in such practices but common features too. Rulers were the “special dead” (Houston et al. 2006:123; see also Binski 1996:21-22). Tropes include: (1) their renaissance as plants of economic and symbolic import

(maize principally)—a veritable *milpa*, orchard, and implied “harvest” of resurgent royalty; (2) a deathly voyage through water and along roads; (3) the extinction or transference of inspiriting wind; (4) their housing in versions of royal abodes, provisioned with food, liquids, riches, at times with servants or attendants; and (5) evidence, in many cases, of interregna or necessary lapses between the date of death and final interment (Fitzsimmons 2009, passim, but esp. Table 6; also Eberl 2005). The interregna, generally pauses of more than a month and sometimes longer, may represent the time necessary to prepare for interments, as goods await assembly and distant visitors gather for obsequies.

What poses a particular challenge is how to handle the *first* royal dead, the founder or founding couple of a dynasty (Fitzsimmons 2009:Table 4). Counts of kings reckoned from founders onward, the so-called *tz’akbu* statements, leave little doubt that the Classic Maya recognized such figures (Schele 1992, building on Mathews 1975 and added work by Riese 1984). Where such dates can be ascertained, many cluster in the third to fourth centuries AD. Some, as at Naranjo or Tikal, go back further still, into the beginnings of the millennium and, in the case of divine or semi-mythic predecessors, to shadowy times before reliable or contemporary records (Martin 2003:4-11; Stuart 2007). These founding figures were probably not the first rulers per se, but rather the kings who created sustained, citable lineages. As such, they contributed to a grand assertion: that a certain family was now ensconced as a ruling dynasty, its founder the central focus of ancestral rites and subsequent building activities.

To identify such founders’ tombs is a matter of speculative plausibility. Glyphs themselves seldom confirm the

Chapter 1

A Tomb and Its Setting

Stephen Houston,
Sarah Newman,
Thomas Garrison,
and Edwin Román

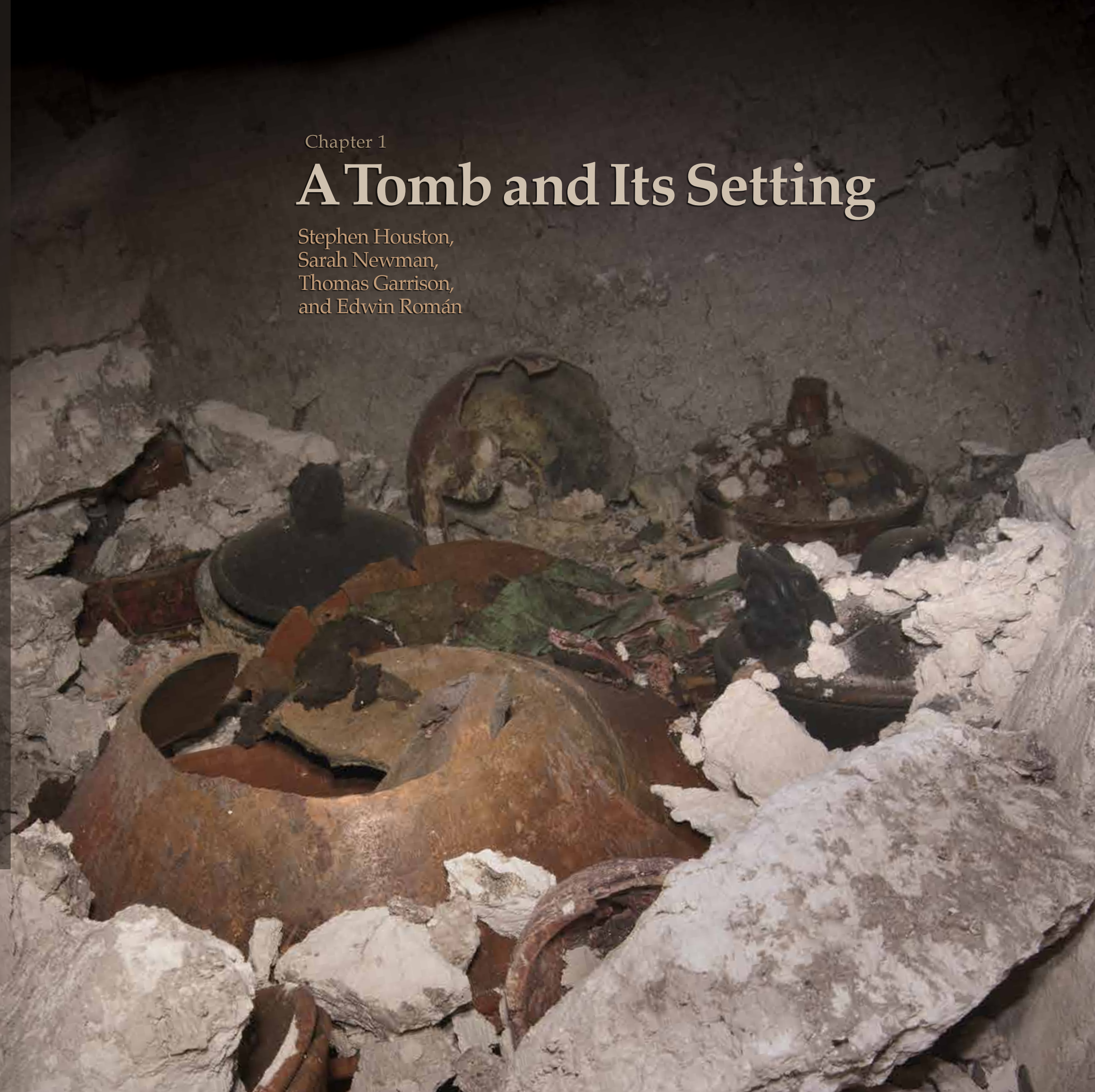


Figure 1.1. Artifacts amidst stones fallen from the walls of El Zotz Burial 9 (see Chapter 3). Photo: Arturo Godoy.

identification of a primary dynast. To be persuasive, such tombs should involve an early and rich crypt in a nodal or axial location, much investment in refurbishing or covering them with later constructions (as well as signs of a novel degree of architectural elaboration), and the continuance of cult practices over the next few centuries (Loten 2003:238-239). The best-attested examples are those at Copan, in the Hunal and Margarita tombs that held, respectively, the founder of a dynasty and his probable consort (Bell 2007; Sharer et al. 2005). Glyphs and later buildings, such as Str. 10L-16, buttress the identification by showing a long-term commitment to the founder and rites performed in his memory (Taube 2004a:293-294).

A yet earlier example is Tikal Burial 85, dating to ca. AD 100. Glyphic confirmation is lacking, but its occupant may well have been Yax Ehb Xook, the founder of the local dynasty. Discovered in Str. 5D-Sub.2-2nd of the North Acropolis, the interment lay within a low platform fronting a preexisting temple (Coe 1990:2:210-220, 4:Figs. 10e, 27b). In a sense, the new shrine both marked and interrupted passage to the structure behind, leading some to speculate that the deceased lord had used the earlier building in life (Houk et al. 2010:244-245). At Tikal, similar shrines appeared nearby in Burials 166 and 167, the latter in much the same position with respect to the building behind (Coe 1990:2:237). A century or so later a comparable tomb, also in a low shrine fronting an earlier mound, was built at Chan Chich, Belize (Houk et al. 2010).

But perhaps the most noteworthy shrines of this sort are the richly endowed tombs with Teotihuacan-linked objects in Mounds A and B at Kaminaljuyu, Guatemala (Kidder et al. 1946:Figs. 103, 104, 110, 111). Of these, Tomb B-1 under Mound B is perhaps closest to the Diablo pattern, with a lower shrine in front of the main temple (Kidder et al. 1946:Fig. 113). Mounds A and B both orient towards the west, much like El Diablo. It is El Diablo that is innovative. The tombs at Kaminaljuyu may be slightly later in date (Braswell 2003:102), with evidence that some of their occupants came from the Peten or

at least the southern Maya Lowlands (Wright et al. 2010:175).

Some comparisons are more complicated. Calakmul's Early Classic Tomb 1 includes all the telltale signs of a founder's interment: a vaulted masonry tomb featuring a nine-meter-long "psychoduct" recovered beneath Str. III (a major structure near the Central Plaza), as well as offerings with hundreds of shells, ten ceramic vessels of varying degrees of elaboration, and three jade mosaic masks. Yet despite the central location of the tomb and the richness of its contents, later rulers at Calakmul do not mention the individual within Tomb 1 and the tomb postdates Stela 43, commissioned by a different Early Classic ruler in AD 431 (Folan et al. 1995:321-325). A handful of other Maya tombs exhibit similar characteristics to those from Copan, but extensive looting often makes evidence linking chambers to founders elusive. Balamku's Tomb 5 and the associated (looted) Tomb 4 echo the paired placement of the Hunal and Margarita tombs, as well as the subsequent construction of monumental funerary architecture. The Balamku tombs preceded a later funerary temple, Str. D5-5 sub, with Tomb 4 found below the structure's front chamber and Tomb 5 directly beneath the rear (Pereira and Michelet 2004:333-334). Similarly, three Early Classic tombs (Tombs 1, 19, and 23) beneath Str. C1 at Río Azul each precede a major funerary-ceremonial structure and demonstrate an elaboration in architectural design and decoration found in only one other instance at the site (Hall 1989:186-189). In 2013, Francisco Estrada-Belli found a parallel arrangement at Holmul, Guatemala, but from the final half of the sixth century AD. This building, Str. B in Group II, displayed a roofcomb frieze of deeply modeled stucco with a seated lord and deities. On axis with its front terrace, it also revealed a burial yielding ceramic vessels of Tepeu 1 (early Late Classic) form and decoration (Boyle 2013).

In an operation directed by Edwin Román in 2010, the El Zotz Archaeological Project found a similar tomb at El Zotz, Guatemala (Figure 1.2): an intact, vaulted chamber placed in front of a building modeled with

elaborate stucco. This monograph reports on that find, drawing on the efforts of specialists of varying backgrounds and a team of archaeologists working in the El Diablo Group from 2008 to 2015. The tomb, found beneath Str. F8-1 and labeled "El Zotz Burial 9," forms part of a continuous tally of interments recorded by the project, but it proved to be a singular find (Figure 1.1). Other intact burials at El Zotz included modest mortuary furniture and one to three ceramic vessels at most, while looted royal tombs under Strs. L8-9, L8-10, L8-11, and M7-1 only hinted at richly endowed deposits that are forever lost to illicit looting. Burial 9 stood apart. Its complete inventory of contents, untouched by looters, showed an exponential investment over the more modest interments recovered by the Project. As will become clear, its location on a high escarpment pointed to a message designed to be sent far and wide. The visibility of its associated funerary temple heralded the dynastic tomb, unparalleled to that point. The temple's elaborate stucco program likened the deceased lord to the sun in all its aspects: subject to daily renewal but also cloaked and transformed at night against a celestial band. Accession and succession were other themes embedded in its rich ornament (see Chapter 5).

In contrast to Burial 85 at Tikal and the find at Holmul, El Zotz Burial 9 could not have been intrusive. Rather, it motivated the construction of the temple behind it. Later, the addition of a freestanding shrine directly above the tomb paid homage to the funerary temple's stucco program through its recessed panels, a reference to the latest phase of the earlier structure. Over the next 50 to 100 years, remodeling completely encompassed both the stuccoed temple and its shrine, transforming the funerary monument into a higher pyramid with a single-chambered temple at its summit. Nonetheless, the iconography of the initial temple, though reduced, was retained via frontal masks with earspools that recalled the designs of those buried below. In sum: a place of dynastic origins, a bold affirmation of continuity, and a tangible link between rulers and solar or celestial deities.

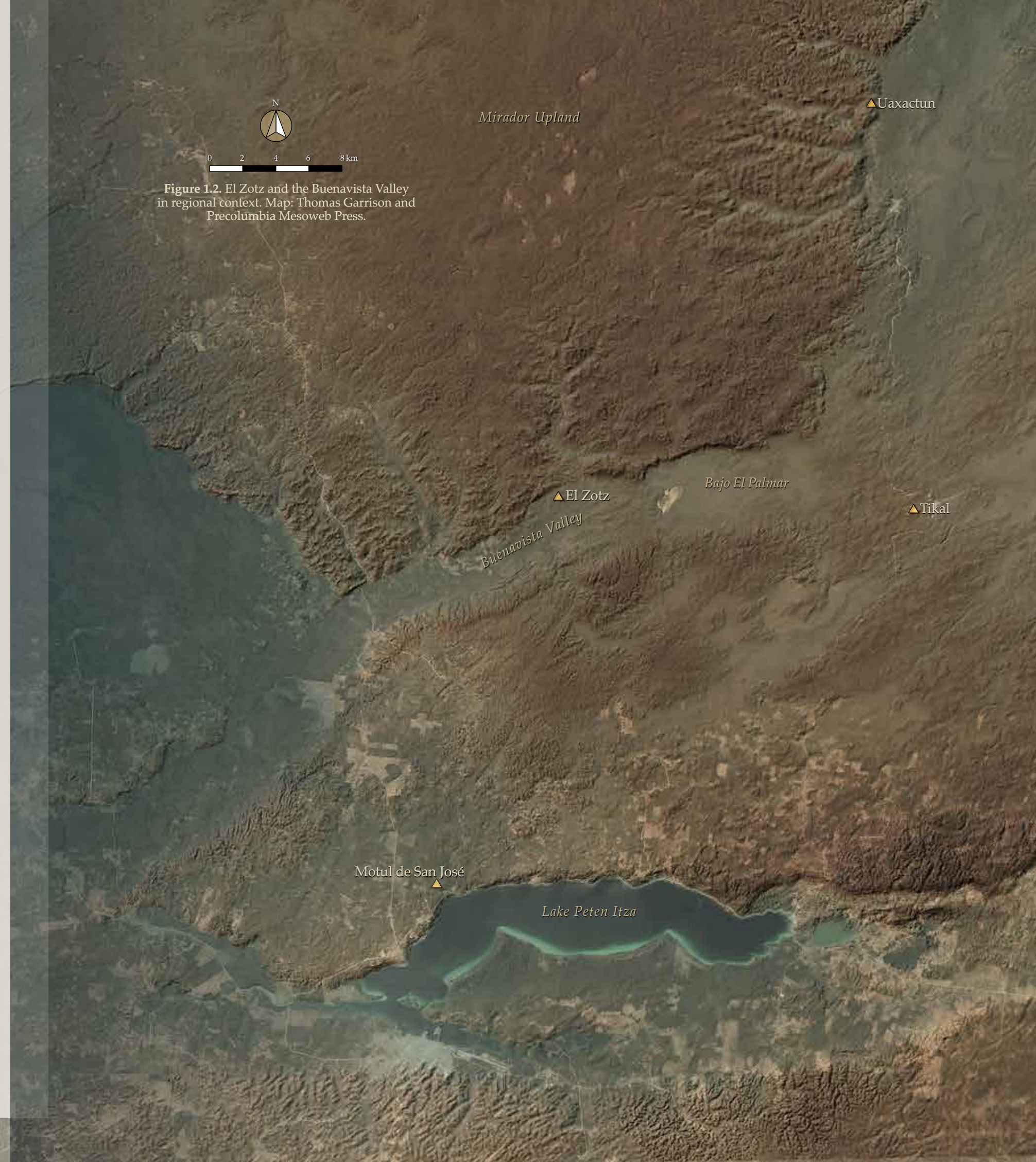


Figure 1.2. El Zotz and the Buenavista Valley in regional context. Map: Thomas Garrison and Precolumbia Mesoweb Press.

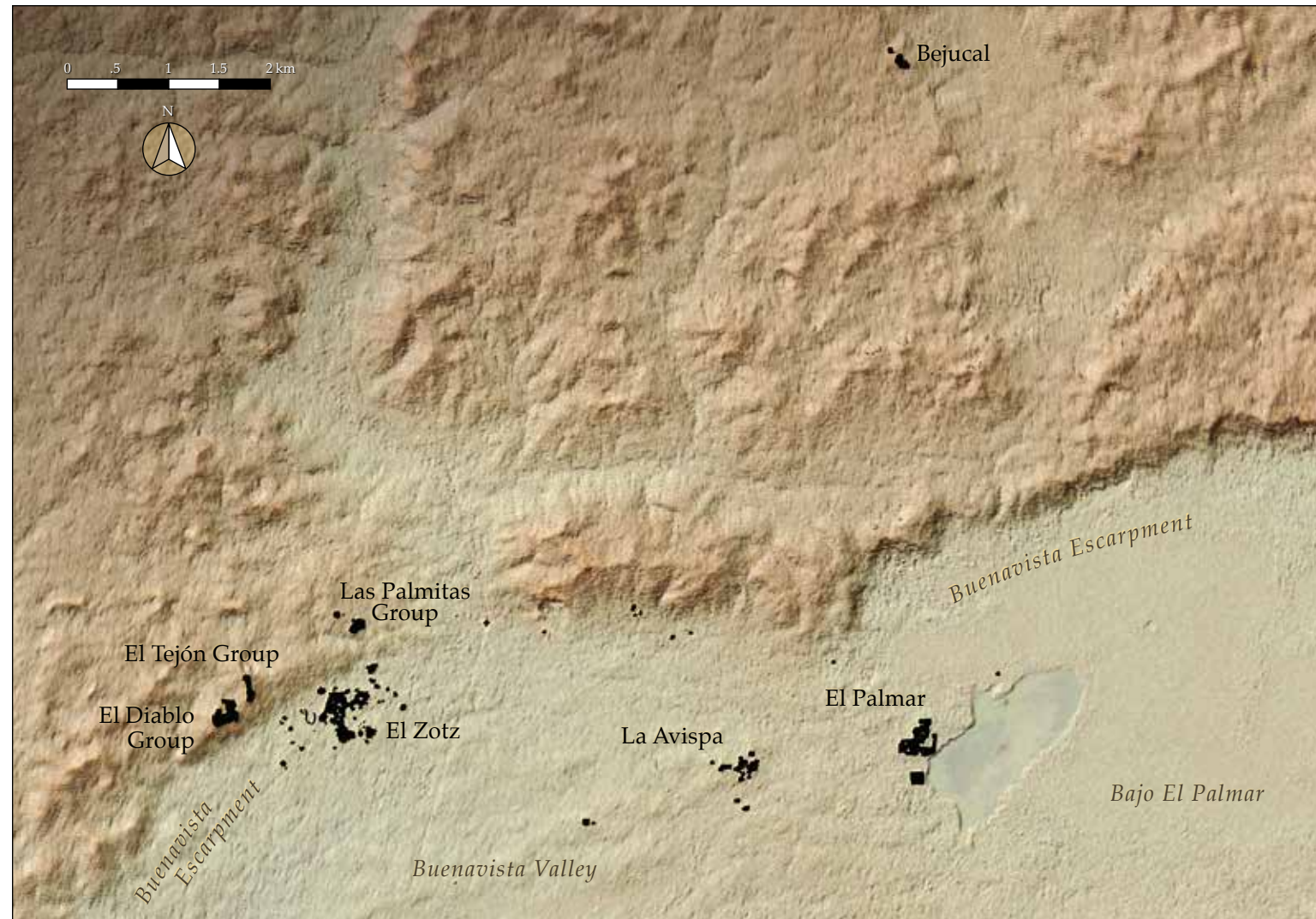


Figure 1.3. To the west and north of the main center of El Zotz, the El Diablo, El Tejón, and Las Palmitas Groups sit on higher ground atop the Buenavista Escarpment. To the east of El Zotz are the Preclassic settlements of La Avispa and El Palmar. The minor center of Bejucal is located in the karst hills to the north of the Buenavista Escarpment. Map: Thomas Garrison and Precolumbia Mesoweb Press.

A Royal Redoubt

The regional setting of El Diablo, and the overarching city of El Zotz, is defined by the Buenavista Valley (Figures 1.2 and 1.3). This 32-km-long east-west corridor forms the northernmost passage connecting the northeast and northwest Peten in the central Maya lowlands. The main ruins of El Zotz lie on low foothills to the north side of the valley, while the Preclassic settlements of La Avispa and El Palmar occupy the valley's center, reflecting a lesser concern with defense. El Palmar sits on the western edge of a small wetland (*cival*), which is fed by a large *bajo* or seasonal swamp. The most salient feature of the area, however, is the looming Buenavista Escarpment, a feature defin-

ing the northern edge of the valley. On it flourished the major satellite groups of El Zotz: El Tejón, Las Palmitas, and not least, El Diablo itself (Figure 1.4). The escarpment is a major geophysical feature in the landscape, transitioning to rolling karst hills to the north, beyond which lies the so-called Mirador "basin"—frequently misnamed, as it is in fact an upland. The minor center of Bejucal, a possible estate or rural retreat for the ruler of El Zotz, is situated among these hills.

The Buenavista Valley is also located at a strategic divide of drainages. The large Bajo El Palmar separates El Zotz and El Palmar from Tikal. The bajo also operates as a local watershed that drains into the El Palmar wetland as well as another nearby *cival* called El Yesal. To

the east, towards Tikal, all drainages flow toward the Caribbean. To the west, in and around El Zotz, all water leads to the San Pedro Mártir River, eventually spilling into the Gulf of Mexico. El Zotz is also situated just west of a major north-south drainage that splits the Buenavista Escarpment. The Las Palmitas Group rises on a low hillock overlooking this sector. The eastern side of the split contains a sinkhole with lateral caves that issue large clouds of bats each evening in search of food, along with swooping owls and hawks to prey on them. This phenomenon, which gives the site its modern name—*zotz* (*sotz*) meaning "bat" in most Mayan languages—would not have gone unnoticed by the ancient Maya.

The El Diablo Group was built on

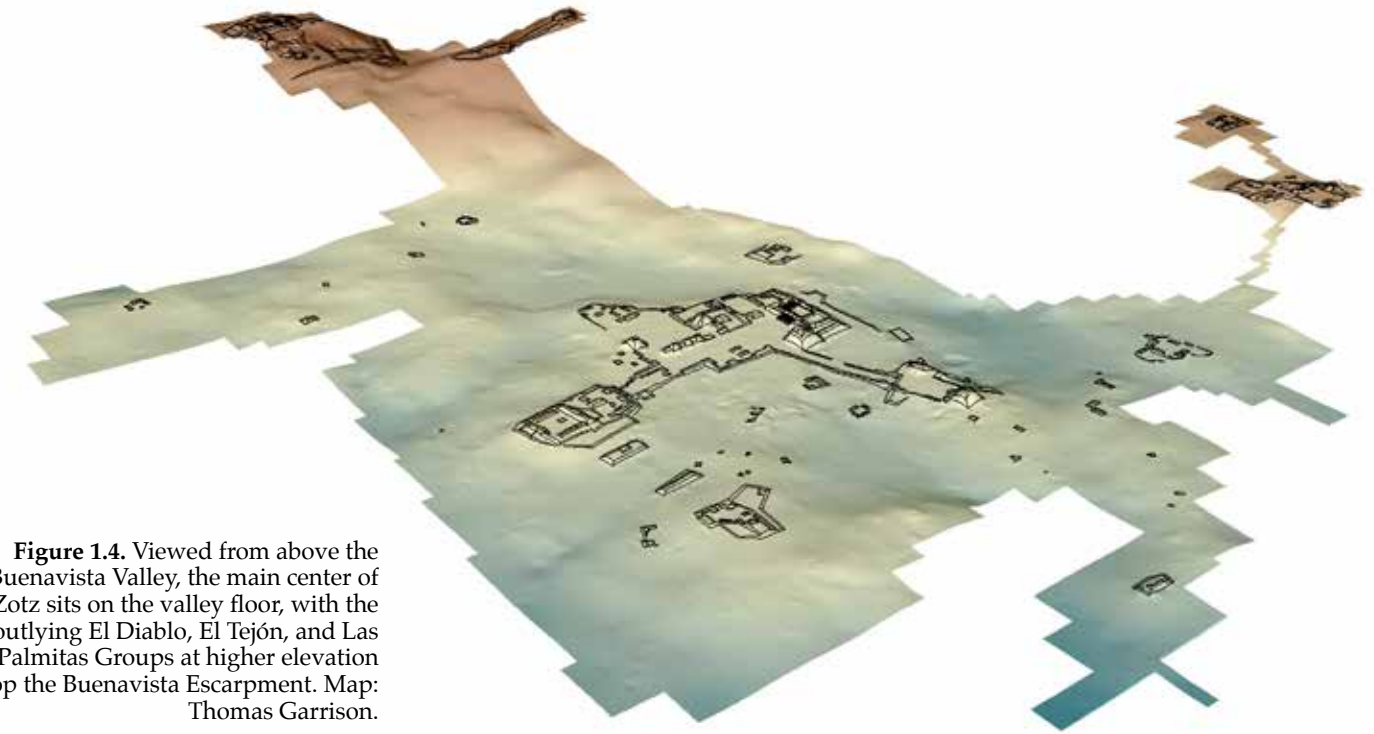


Figure 1.4. Viewed from above the Buenavista Valley, the main center of El Zotz sits on the valley floor, with the outlying El Diablo, El Tejón, and Las Palmitas Groups at higher elevation atop the Buenavista Escarpment. Map: Thomas Garrison.

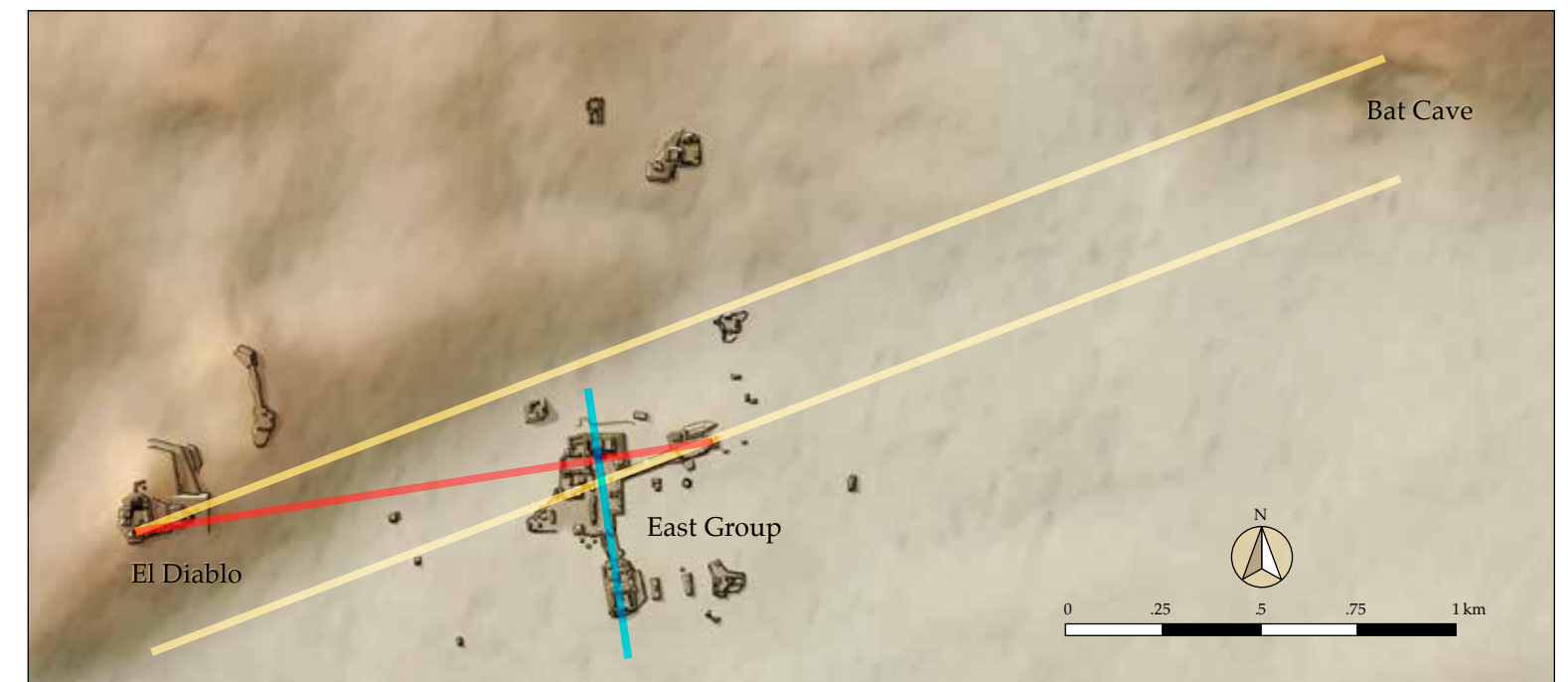


Figure 1.5. Alignments of Early Classic architecture at El Zotz. Str. F8-1 at El Diablo is oriented to 261°, directly aligned with the center of Str. M7-1-Sub.2 of the East Group at the main site along the reciprocal angle of 81° (red line). The Southern Causeway runs along a perpendicular axis of 171° (blue line). The Eastern Causeway of El Zotz orients to 69°, the same angle as the line of sight between El Diablo and the Bat Cave (yellow lines). Map: Thomas Garrison.

one of the most prominent hilltops along the Buenavista Escarpment. Although the El Tejón Group is a few meters higher in elevation than El Diablo, the Tejón ridge sits back from the edge of the escarpment. In contrast, the El Diablo architecture is located on the edge of a steep drop down to the valley

floor. The buildings at El Diablo, especially Str. F8-1 and its anterior phases, would have been highly visible to foot traffic crossing the Buenavista Valley. In total, the El Diablo Group comprises 23 structures of various sizes and shapes, distributed over four tiers of platforms, which the Maya shaped out of the

natural contours of the hilltop. The plaza of the highest part of the group, where the elite architecture concentrates, corresponds to an elevation of 382.7 meters above sea level. This is about 150 m higher than the main ruins of El Zotz, which lie at the base of the escarpment to the east. The final phase of Str. F8-1

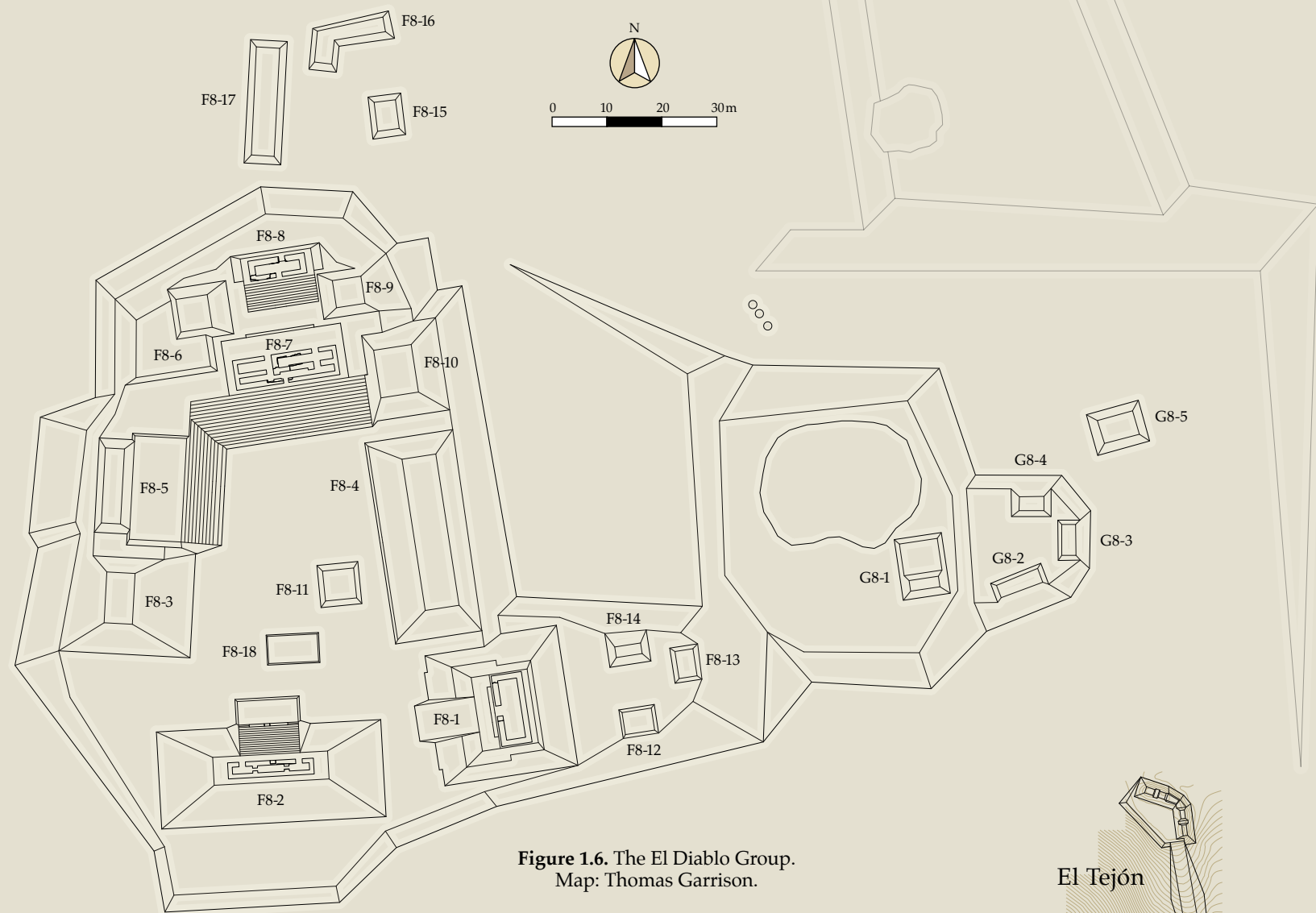
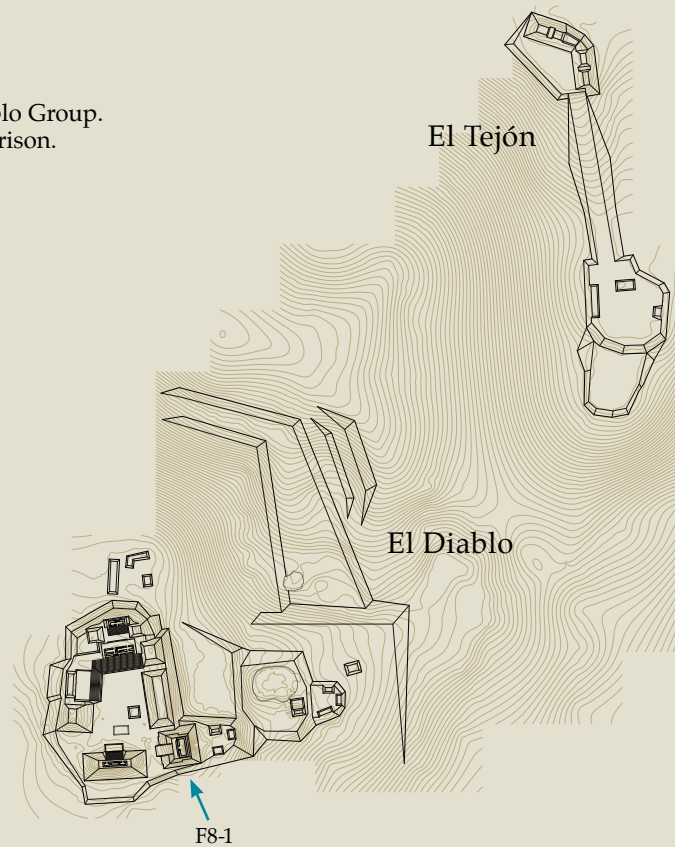


Figure 1.6. The El Diablo Group.
Map: Thomas Garrison.

currently stands at 13.3 m in height, yet excavations demonstrate that the temple on top of the pyramid was destroyed down to its lower courses (see Chapter 2).

Str. F8-1 is oriented to about 261°, facing roughly to the west and towards the El Diablo plaza. This orientation was critical for Early Classic El Zotz. The centerline of Str. F8-1-Sub.1C (the Temple of the Night Sun, the elaborate stucco temple commemorating Burial 9) intersects with the centerline of Str. M7-1-Sub.2 of the East Group of El Zotz (a structure known as the Accession Platform) precisely along this axis, establishing the major east-west alignment for much early building at the site (Figure 1.5). The 171° orientation of the Southern Causeway at El Zotz is perpendicular. This east-west alignment, along with others at the site, may have derived from observations of sunrise, perhaps from the small platform behind Str. F8-1, which has an unobstructed view to the east and houses three mounds (Strs. F8-12, 13, and 14). One of the mounds, Str. F8-14, contains what might be described as a sub-royal burial, not as rich as Burial 9 but probably close to it (see below). The Eastern Causeway of El Zotz orients to 69°, the angle from which, at around the time of the summer solstice in the fourth century AD, the sun could be observed from El Diablo rising over the collapsed sinkhole



and bat cave (see Chapter 2).

The second highest tier of leveling at El Diablo supports three small structures to the north (Strs. F8-15, 16, and 17) and a vacant platform to the east (Figure 1.6). The structures are contemporary with the elite architecture above (see “Ceramics from El Diablo Fill,” page 82), perhaps indicating that these housed palace support staff or functioned as work spaces for producing goods or food for courtly consumption. The third tier of architecture is defined by a massive depression, the result of quarrying to construct the more impressive masonry structures surrounding the main plaza. This depression may have later served as an *aguada* or reservoir for the El Diablo Group, but paleoenvironmental data to support this assertion were equivocal (Timothy Beach and Sheryl Luzzadder-Beach, personal communications, 2011); the presence of a cache of Dos Arroyos bowls within the cavity also raises doubts about such a mundane function. One small structure (Str. G8-1) is located to the southeast of the depression. The fourth and lowest tier of architecture served as a platform for three small structures (Strs. G8-2, 3, and 4). Below this lies Str. G8-5, as well as three *chultunes* (bedrock cisterns). Although uninvestigated, these minor structures likely housed palace support staff while El Diablo was occupied during the Early Classic. The presumed approach to the site, along an east-west ridge, appears to have been leveled artificially but with narrow areas of access—this feature, along with the stepped slopes to most sides of El Diablo, accentuates its defensive properties.

Construction of the major architecture of the El Diablo Group began in the fourth century AD. The establishment of a royal palace in this location reflects a local trend of elites



Figure 1.7. El Zotz’s major architectural groups. Structures discussed in the text are indicated. Map: Thomas Garrison.



Figure 1.8. Fragments of Urita Gouged-Incised pottery and *Spondylus* earspool from El Zotz Burial 1 in Str. F8-14. Photos: Sarah Newman.



Figure 1.9. Jade mosaic earflare plaques from Str. H6-2 at El Tejón. Photos: Nicholas Carter.

appropriating hilltops to use as residences and necropoleis in the beginning years of the Early Classic. This portion of the central Peten did not suffer large-scale regional abandonments at the end of the Late Preclassic, such as those observed in the area around El Mirador to the north (Forsyth 1989:129-131). There was, however, a decisive shift in settlement patterns in and around the Buenavista Valley. There is evidence that hilltops were in use in the region during the Late Preclassic, but they do not appear to have been residential sites. At Bejucal, at least seven small temples date to the second to third centuries AD. Similarly, excavations by Rony Piedrasanta at the El Tejón Group revealed a round platform dating to the beginning of the Early Classic, with a scattering of Late Preclassic ceramics that point to an even earlier occupation. No Preclassic architecture has been found at El Diablo so far.

The major occupation of El Palmar came to an end in the late third century AD, coinciding with a marked drying event in the *cival* (Timothy Beach and Sheryl Luzzadder-Beach, personal communications, 2011). Residential occupation in the valley itself, however, appears to increase, with an emphasis on settling towards the base of the escarpment. Seemingly, the seat of royal power shifted to the hilltops, while everyday life for the rural Maya throughout the Buenavista Valley continued

uninterrupted. It is difficult to explain why the elites headed for the uplands, but the pattern can be observed elsewhere. The site of Uaxactun is located 26 km northeast of El Zotz and is actually situated along the same escarpment, which takes a sharp turn to the north near Tikal (see Figure 1.2). Valdés and Fahsen (1995:199-201) propose that the seat of royal authority shifted repeatedly in the early periods of Uaxactun's history. Originally, in their view, the royal court was located at Group E, the first architectural group to be recognized as a place linked to solar observations in the Maya lowlands (Ricketson and Ricketson 1937). From 150 BC–AD 250 a new palace was built in Group H, decorated with monumental architectural masks. Following a brief return to Group E, between AD 250–300, the elites of Uaxactun moved the royal court to the highest hill at the site, establishing

Group A as the seat of Classic Period authority. This group, rendered in a celebrated watercolor by Tatiana Proskouriakoff (in Smith 1950), also became the royal necropolis for the Uaxactun dynasty. Although these political changes in Uaxactun were highly localized in the landscape, they provide an analogy to concurrent processes in the Buenavista Valley.

The original seat of power at El Palmar was similarly established at an E-Group (Doyle 2012, 2013). Around the same time that the palace in Group A was built on the highest prominence at Uaxactun, the El Diablo palace was developed as the Early Classic seat of authority at El Zotz. At Uaxactun, there had been minor structures on the Group A hillock that preceded palace construction (Valdés 1993). Although there has not been any confirmed Late Preclassic architecture at El Diablo, ceramic data, as well as evidence from other local hill sites, suggest that there would have been a minor occupation. Valdés (1993:92) also contends that increased visibility was one of the primary motivations for moving Uaxactun's royal court to Group A. El Diablo's location on the edge of

the Buenavista Escarpment exercised a similar effect on the local viewshed, both in terms of seeing and being seen.

Foundational Tombs in the Kingdom of El Zotz

The establishment of the palace at El Diablo represented the founding of the first royal burial ground at El Zotz. In addition to El Zotz Burial 9, to be addressed in later chapters, there is likely to be at least one other royal tomb in the vicinity of Str. F8-1. In 2008, Alejandro Guillot Vassaux excavated another royal or sub-royal interment, now looted, in Str. F8-14, one of the three small mounds immediately to the east of Str. F8-1; its finds included a fragment of Urita Gouged-Incised pottery and remains of two *Spondylus* earspools, inside a red-painted crypt with corbelled vault (Figure 1.8). The other mounds showed only equivocal evidence of crypts. One, Str. F8-12, may have had such a deposit but clear traces of it were obliterated because of looting from below. Other Early Classic royal burials are known from El Zotz (see below), but the El Diablo Group appears to have been the first

among them. Notably, Houston has observed that all high status burials encountered thus far in the El Zotz region follow Burial 9's pattern of having the head oriented to the north. Other high-status, though unvaulted, burial chambers dating to the Early Classic (El Zotz Burials 13, 14, and 18) have been found at the El Tejón Group. One of these contained two jade mosaic earflare plaques (Figure 1.9; Carter et al. 2012).

Three major vaulted tombs have been found in the epicenter of El Zotz. Unfortunately, all were looted. The most substantial, and probably the earliest was Burial 16, discovered in a looters' tunnel behind Str. M7-1 (Figure 1.10). The earliest architecture built at this location had been a low platform with two construction phases (Str. M7-1-Sub.1), oriented toward El Palmar to the east. The final phase of the platform was decorated with polychrome modeled stucco, far more deeply and architectonically modeled than the stuccoes on the Temple of the Night Sun, but without the same attention to dense detail (see Chapter 5). The platform was mutilated on all four sides with the advent of a new construction program, perhaps dating to the early fifth century AD, which obeyed the

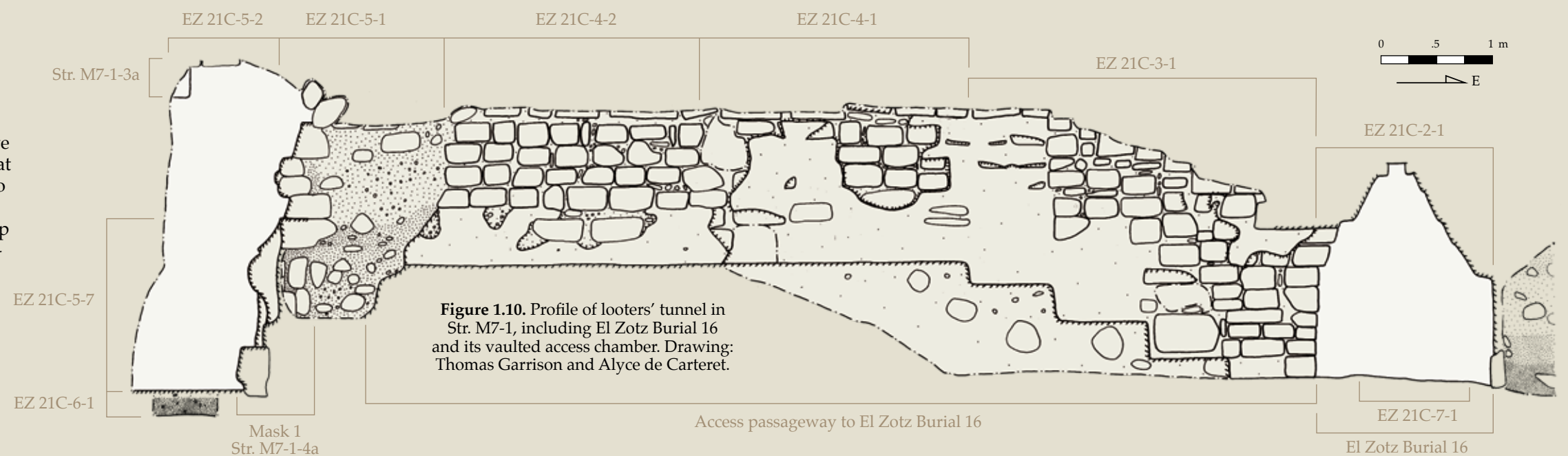


Figure 1.10. Profile of looters' tunnel in Str. M7-1, including El Zotz Burial 16 and its vaulted access chamber. Drawing: Thomas Garrison and Alyce de Carteret.

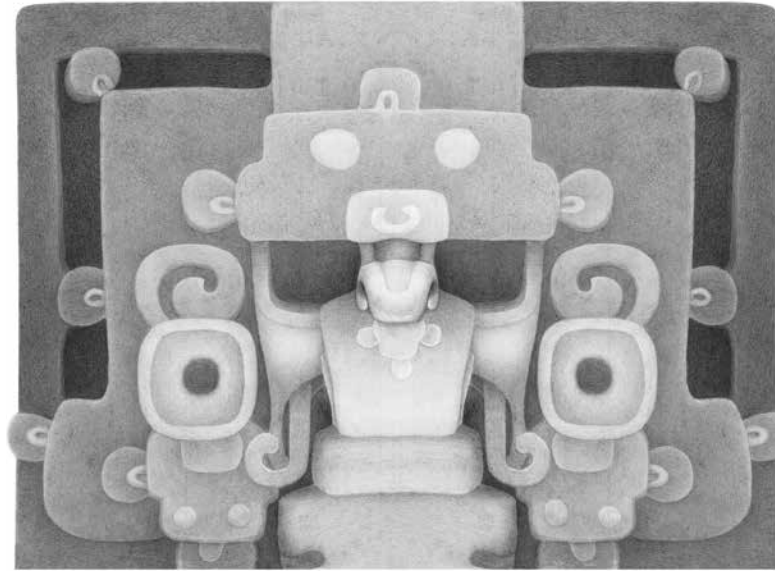


Figure 1.11. Drawing of Mask 1 from Str. M7-1 and photograph of Mask 2. Drawing: Mary Clarke; photo: Jorge Pérez de Lara.

orientational canons established at El Diablo. The royal tomb was placed against the rear (western) side of the earlier platform and a vaulted access chamber that stepped down into the tomb was added to the east side. This low corridor was covered in rustic stucco and crookedly constructed. The structure built around the tomb was a 3 m tall platform bearing three masks (Figure 1.11). These were each 3 m tall by almost 4.5 m wide. There is no evidence that the Accession Platform was ever painted: most of the stucco is well preserved and plain white, an exception being the faint hint of a painted pupil in the eye sockets of the northern mask.

Taube (1998:454-458; Taube et al. 2010:65-67) has previously identified the deity depicted on the masks as a conflation of the Principal Bird Deity (PBD) and the Jester God, which is often shown as a jewel or headdress offered to or worn by the ruler during royal accessions. In these instances, the two supernaturals also combine with world tree iconography, usually depicted emerging from the PBD's head (Taube 1998:Fig. 15; Taube et al. 2010:Fig. 43). More recently, Stuart (2012) has identified the name of this god as Ux Yop Huun, a deity associated with paper headbands presented during early royal accessions. Str. M7-1-Sub.2's monumental masks of Ux Yop Huun are the reason it is known as the Accession Platform.

The ancient Maya mutilated the central mask of the Accession Platform before building the next phase of Str. M7-1. It is probable that this was done to re-enter Burial 16. The combination of symbols associated with Ux Yop Huun, as embodied in a jewel or headdress, conflates the institution of kingship with a notion of centrality. An image of this headdress being presented to an acceding maize god is depicted on the West Wall of the San Bartolo murals, indicating the supernatural essence of the rite of accession (Taube et al. 2010:65-67). Perhaps the closest iconographic parallel to the mask on the Accession Platform is an early Late Classic carved jade boulder from Altun Ha dating to the beginning of the seventh century AD. This artifact, which Taube (1998:458) associates with one of the three stones of a jade hearth located at the world center, fuses Ux Yop Huun with Sun God imagery. In fact, when the imagery on this boulder is "rolled out," it presents a reasonable, albeit more detailed, resemblance to the Accession Platform masks. Taube (1998:467-468) has argued that Maya masks represent the concept of centrality and that the three hearthstones can be depicted in profile. In this arrangement, each mask of Ux Yop Huun represents one of the hearthstones. Together, the three would thus represent an extended, laterally displayed version of the jade hearth.

The parallels with Altun Ha go deeper still. The so-called "Sun God's Tomb" (Altun Ha Tomb B-4/7), the crypt containing the jade boulder, was found in Str. B-4, 2nd A, eventually adorned with five masks of Ux Yop Huun (Pendergast 1969, 1982a:47-78). The more complex Altun Ha building is about 100–150 years later than the Accession Platform at El Zotz, but it supports the idea that this was a specific type of Early Classic building associated with royal accessions. The Accession Platform only held a small (50 cm

high) superstructural platform, suggesting that it might have been designed to support a perishable scaffold throne, a feature depicted on San Bartolo's West Wall and on the façade of the Temple of the Night Sun. The fact that the Temple of the Night Sun and the Accession Platform are aligned perfectly along their centerlines creates a clear link between the two tombs and the individuals interred in them. Perhaps they were father and son, or some more distant connection, buried at the west and east termini of the main axis of Early Classic El Zotz.

Strs. L8-10 and L8-11 of the Plaza of the Five Temples at El Zotz, excavated by Jose Luis Garrido López, also revealed more impressive tombs. Burial 21 within Str. L8-10 consisted of a finely stuccoed chamber, painted red on all sides (Figure 1.12), while Burial 22 in Str. L8-11 featured a massive vaulted chamber with a crude shelf to hold offerings. A large jade ear spool and fragments from a jade mosaic mask, similar to the ones found intact at El Diablo, were found beneath the looters' debris in Burial 22.

In 2009, archaeologists discovered a small hilltop site 2 km southwest of El Zotz using AIRSAR elevation data (Garrison et al. 2011). It contained another vaulted tomb within a small, looted temple at the site. The tomb included a small bench, which may have been used to place offerings, as well as ceramics from the Early Classic period found in the looters' back dirt. At nearby Bejucal, Burial 2 consisted of a large vaulted tomb with polished and stuccoed capstones, found in Str. S6-10 (Figure 1.13). The north side of this tomb may have had a psychoduct in its wall. As with much of El Zotz, the burial was looted, but a complex lip-to-lip dedicatory cache was found just east of the tomb, containing numerous seashells, stingray spines, miniature jade and



Figure 1.12. Stuccoed, red-painted tomb chamber of El Zotz Burial 21, located within Str. L8-10. Photo: Jose Luis Garrido López.

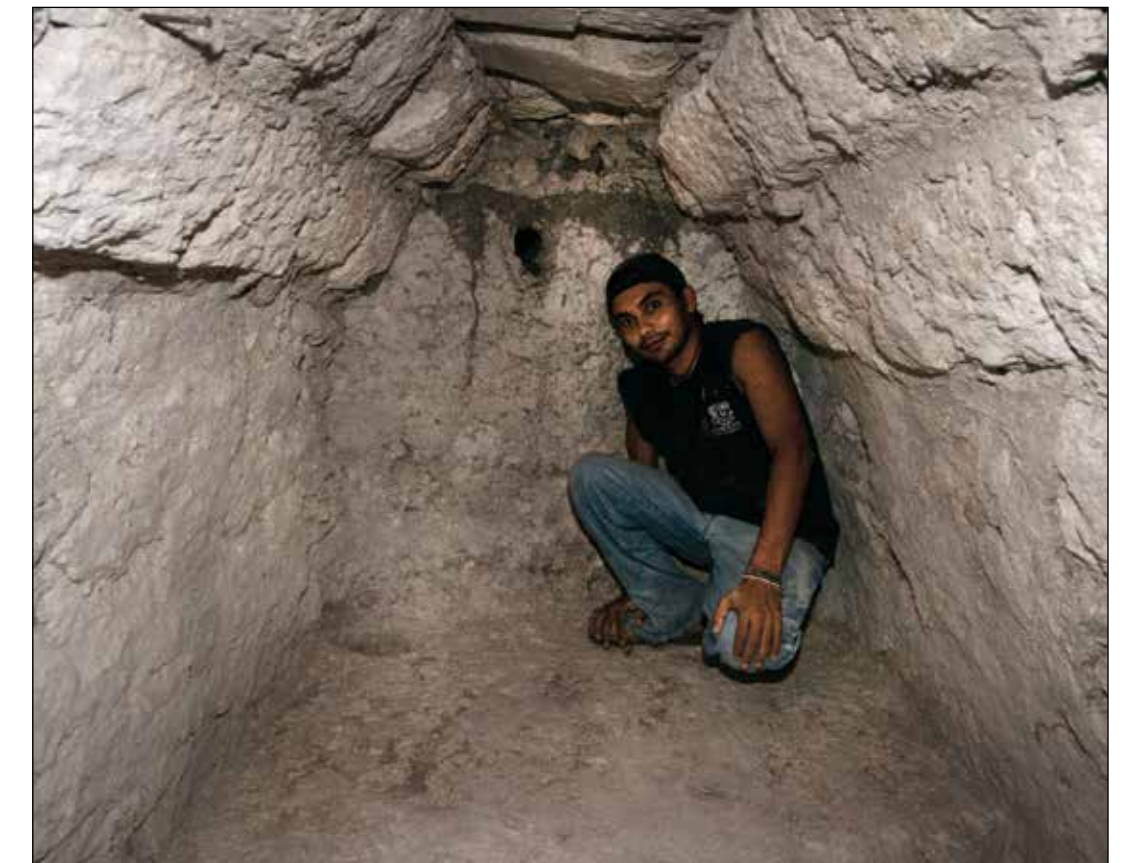


Figure 1.13. Bejucal Burial 2 and its stuccoed capstones, found within Str. S6-10, oriented at ca. 10° off magnetic north. Photo: Thomas Garrison.



Figure 1.14. Discovery of modeled stucco masks. Photo: Arturo Godoy.

mica objects, and a New World quail skeleton (a species also found in one of the ceramic vessels from Burial 9). There were other high-status burials at Bejucal (e.g., Burials 3 and 5), but none as impressive as Burial 2. All of these deposits provide a larger context for Burial 9 and its enveloping building, the Temple of the Night Sun.

Digging the El Diablo Tomb

The tomb came to light on May 29, 2010. Project members had suspected for a week that something lay nearby. The modeled stuccoes discovered in 2009 (Figure 1.14), the small free-standing shrine structure, and the eastern location in front of the Temple of the Night Sun all cued some special deposit. The

absence of looters' tunnels in this area heightened our sense of expectation, as did the growing (and rather grim) evidence of unusual features, principally the cached bowls with fingers or teeth described in Chapter 2. In the days leading up to the discovery, a pit in the central axis of the shrine had begun to reveal an increasingly ordered arrangement of stone slabs. Layer upon layer was removed. Then, in the late afternoon of May 29, Eliseo ("Cheyo") Alvarado, the worker tasked with this part of the El Diablo operations, probed a small aperture under a flagstone with a thin stick. He found no perceptible end. Houston descended to the level of the stone and, chipping away at the slab, opened a triangular hole (Figure 1.15). When a light bulb was lowered through

the opening, the deposit blazed with color. Alex Knodell, a Brown University graduate student mapping nearby, recorded a short video of this initial view into the chamber by lowering a hand-held camera alongside the light bulb, a record that captures the drama of the moment. After more chipping of the capstone, and some sawing—the limestone was quite soft—project photographer Arturo Godoy was able to take wide-angle images of the interior of the chamber. From this point on, security became a priority, and workmen took shifts at the tomb for a round-the-clock watch. A call went out by cellphone to find a professional conservator who could assist with the excavation. Fortunately, a freelancer, Catherine Magee, was available through the assistance of



Figure 1.15. Opening the triangular hole in the capstone of the Burial 9 tomb and a partial view through the aperture, showing fallen stones from wall collapse, ceramic vessels, objects covered in painted stucco, textiles, seashells, and red cubes of specular hematite. Photo: Arturo Godoy.

Harriet Beaubien of the Smithsonian Institution.

The initial approach to the tomb, just to the north of the central east-west axis of the chamber, proved awkward. The floor was littered with rock fall, calling into question the strength of the tomb's walls and capstones. This, combined with the two meter drop from the apex of the vault to vessels and other objects below, made it impossible to descend without damaging the find. Entering the tomb from the eastern wall, in the corridor between the Temple of the Night Sun and its fronting Shrine structure, was not an option because of unstable doorjamb nearby. Instead, the team decided that the most effective entry would be from the west, at the level of the chamber's floor. Workers could extend the main tunnel penetrating F8-1 beyond the front of the Shrine and drop down via a deep shaft to bedrock. Yet what had seemed the easiest route soon met other challenges.

A series of caches, six in all (Cache 3/Burial 6 and Caches 4–8), slowed excavation (see Chapter 2). Cache 3 was removed whole



Figure 1.16. Removal of Cache 3. Photos: Arturo Godoy,

on May 31 and its contents excavated in the on-site laboratory (Figure 1.16). The remaining caches, found in a quadripartite arrangement around a crude stone altar just outside the tomb's western wall, were excavated over the next few days. In addition, a poorly preserved column altar, its crude mask facing toward the west, was inadvertently cut by a laborer as the deep shaft was excavated through the night and into the early morning hours. Despite these difficulties, the entry was successful. By June 4, the team had reached the estimated level of the floor. Shaving away at the soft, tenoned stones of the western wall, Houston and Román soon saw a pin-prick of light through the stony matrix. This small beam came from a light bulb that had been lowered into the tomb itself. The talc-like stone, softened by water damage, soon gave way to a dull, brown surface. This proved to be the plastered wall of the tomb, now only centimeters away. A small hole was pried open and expanded as three rows of stone blocks were removed (the strength of the tomb's walls still a concern) (Figure 1.17). By chance, the hole lay close to the head of the tomb's main occupant, an area of complex deposits. Entering to the south by the feet would have been the ideal option, but the more extensive tunneling involved was held to be too risky, given the widespread looting that affected the structural integrity of the building.

On June 6, Magee arrived. Godoy attempted a photo-mosaic of the tomb deposit from the opening in the capstone above (Figure 1.18). The aim was to assemble an overall image that could be used for a plan drawing. The space for photography was limited, however, and distortions soon made this approach unworkable. Drawing and photographic documentation were instead done piecemeal, in smaller segments. The team decided to excavate the tomb by an alphanumeric grid system, with the northwest corner of the tomb set as the A1 square—in fact little more than a wedge due to the irregular space of the chamber floor. At Magee's suggestion, sectors of 25 x 25 cm were laid out across the surface of the tomb's contents, though not without frustrations. Any attempt to lay out an actual grid of line or string was thwarted by the difficulty of reaching across the full length and width of the tomb. Worse, the hard bedrock of the tomb floor dulled nails, and no permanent data points could be set. The team decided to use small floating markers to tag the corners between the grid's sectors, though these still posed certain challenges. The actual floor of the chamber was often some 10 to 20 cm below the markers (often placed atop vessels, shells, and other objects), and the markers shifted slightly as the layers of superimposed rock fall and objects were removed.

Nonetheless, Godoy was able to photograph each sector, taking multiple views of each level as the squares were slowly excavated to the bedrock floor. Digital images were downloaded to a laptop set up outside and printed at a scale of 1:2 using Adobe Illustrator software (the generators providing light to the excavations also serviced a computer station under tarps). At Garrison's



Figure 1.17. Opening the hole in the western wall and a first view through the aperture. Photos: Arturo Godoy.

suggestion, a layer of drafting film was then placed on each color print and attached to a clipboard, which was taken into the tomb and traced against measurements of the actual deposit. This process allowed drawings to be done rapidly and accurately. The drawings were marked extensively with comments and each artifact and fragment labeled and numbered on both the drawing of its sector and its packaging. Newman and Garrison kept a running inventory as every object was removed. At first, the cramped space made excavations slow, and the team had to perch outside the tomb to clear space inside. Once sectors were cleared, the team could enter the chamber in pairs and continue excavations. Magee removed more fragile remains, such as

wood, textiles, and thin painted stuccoes, using cyclododecane or Japanese tissue (see Appendix III). She also packaged each object for hand-carrying to the field lab, a distance of 2 km, and prepared objects in their final packing for transport to the project laboratory in Antigua, Guatemala. The results were remarkable. No objects were damaged in their journey from Burial 9 to the project lab.

Widespread use of cellphones at the site led to reports of the tomb reaching the nearby towns of Flores and San Benito. After discussion with Griselda Pérez, the official IDAEH representative for El Zotz, it seemed desirable to lift as many of the objects as possible for quiet transport to the lab in Antigua. Godoy took additional photographs and the

tomb's elaborate ceramic collection, obviously of interest to looters, was removed. Accompanied by Nicholas Carter, the objects left El Zotz on June 15 and arrived in Antigua the next day. Unfortunately, this furtive maneuver did not reduce our risk. The very secrecy of the process meant that thieves would think the finds were still in the tomb. A subset of the most reliable workmen continued on round-the-clock watch at the entrance to the tunnel; most workmen had been sent home after backfilling other operations at El Zotz. Ironically, improvements in the weather only increased our vulnerability. Most vehicles can enter a dry road; a swampy route requires more expensive, specialized pickups—the lower the investment in getting to El Zotz, the greater the chance of theft or assault. The excavation of the final layers of artifacts within the tomb nearly became a 24-hour operation, with archaeologists taking shifts.

By June 17, the areas around the edges of the burial had all been documented and cleared. The few remaining sectors were those with especially fragile or perishable materials (described in detail in Chapter 3): a polychrome painted stucco vessel with a sculpted lid in the shape of a water bird, a complete (though crushed) bowl also of perishable materials, and a concentration of debris around the king's skull, including bits of his headdress. June 18 was the final day of full digging at El Diablo. Newman and Garrison finished architectural profiles and reviewed the artifact inventory; Magee lifted and packed all remaining objects. By late afternoon, Houston and Newman completed final measurements and sections of the now empty tomb. For the first time, faced with nothing but the empty chamber's walls, Houston noticed potter wasp nests on the eastern, southern, and western walls of the tomb. Photos and samples were taken for later study. The small remaining team was able to exit the camp on June 19, with all finds in good order.

The royal burial at El Diablo could now be described, analyzed, and reported, an undertaking of the chapters and appendices that follow.

Figure 1.18. Composite of four photographs of the Burial 9 tomb, showing a section of the deposit with rockfall from wall collapse atop ceramic vessels, objects covered in painted stucco, textiles, seashells, and red cubes of specular hematite. Photo-mosaic: Arturo Godoy.



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