

# Managing the Marketplace: The View from Ximbal Che, an Intermediate Elite Architectural Group at Yaxnohcah, Campeche

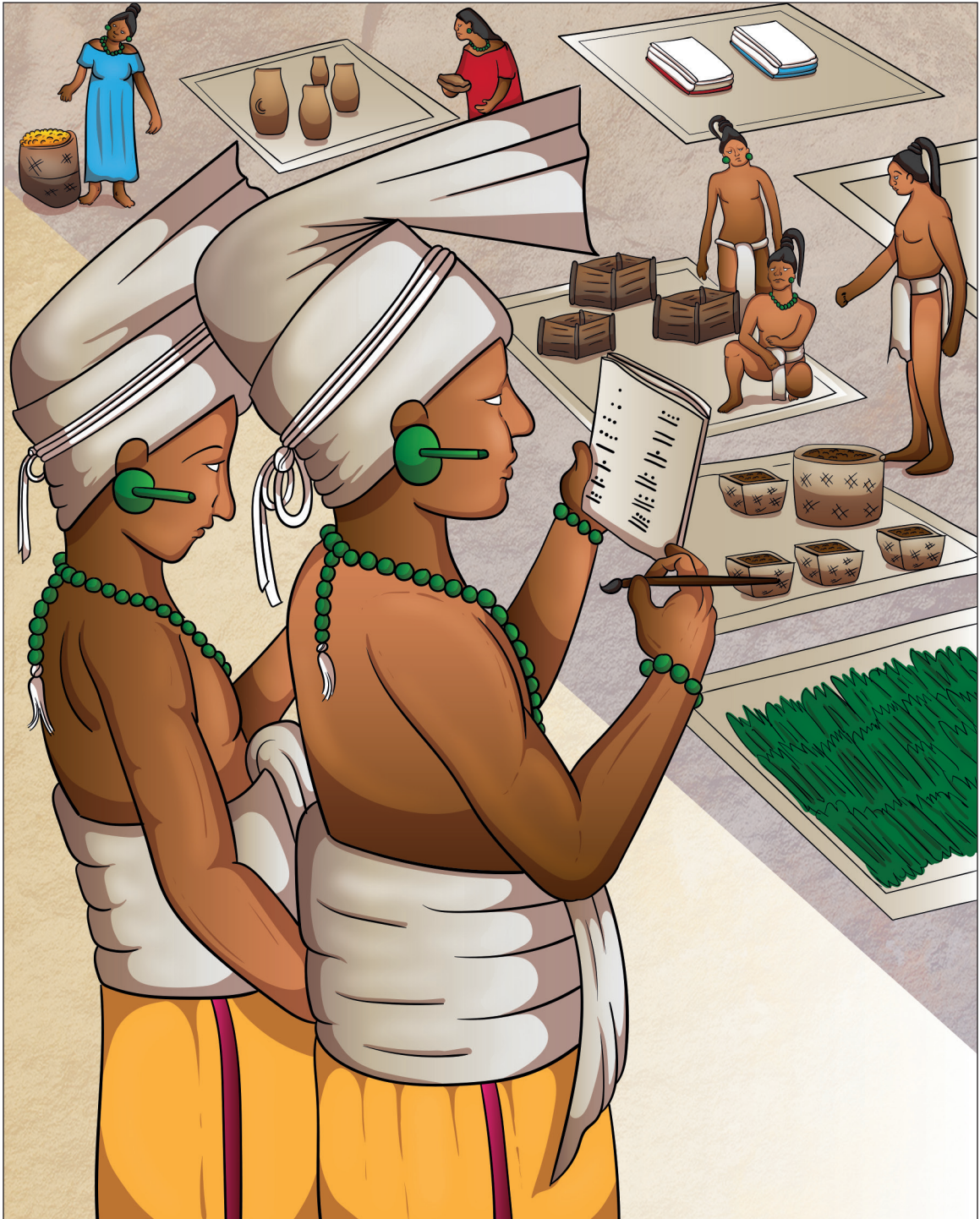
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*In recent years, studies have documented a surprisingly diverse array of social, political, and economic integrative strategies of intermediate elites, enhancing our understanding of ancient Maya social organization. Here, we present the preliminary results of one such study that aims to document practices and activities at Ximbal Che, an intermediate elite architectural group at Yaxnohcah, Campeche. In addition to revealing a complex history of construction, expansion, and remodelling spanning the Late Preclassic (200 BC-AD 200) through to the end of the Late Classic (AD 650-850), our investigations have supplied a glimpse into the shifting socioeconomic strategies of the people who resided at this group. Ximbal Che is located next to Yaxnohcah's Sakjol complex, interpreted as a marketplace constructed and in operation during the Late Classic. We hypothesize that Ximbal Che was the residential and administrative site of an intermediate elite corporate group that played a critical role in integrating its surrounding neighborhood by organizing and administering this marketplace.*

**Keywords:** *Yaxnohcah, intermediate elites, household archaeology, Maya marketplaces, socioeconomic institutions, social integration*

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Throughout much of the early and middle twentieth century, Classic Maya society was thought of as a rigid, two-tiered system comprised of nobles (“elites”) and commoners (“non-elites”; Becker 1979; Roys 1972; Sanders and Webster 1988). This essentialist perspective treated elites and commoners as if they were homogenous and bounded groups, each representative of one part of an ideal dichotomy, even though many of the material attributes used to define “elites” – for instance, art, monumental architecture, sumptuous interments, and exotic material goods – were found to be relatively common (Bullard 1960; Chase 1992; Gonlin 1993; Haviland and Moholy-Nagy 1992; Hendon 1991; Willey et al. 1965). In more recent years, it has become accepted that Classic Maya societies are better characterized by a gradation of socioeconomic differentiation rather than a rigid elite/commoner dichotomy (Munson and Scholnick 2021). Debate remains, however, if this shift in understanding merely reflects that wealth can be quantified in terms of material objects, whereas status is the domain of more intangible resources, such as political authority, knowledge, and genealogical pedigree (Hutson 2020:408-409). Nevertheless, as research documents and unpacks variation across the Maya socio-spatial landscape, it has become apparent that archaeological data no longer fits earlier ways of thinking about social organization (Iannone and Connell 2003; Lamb 2022; Longstaffe and Iannone 2022; Lohse and Valdez 2004; Walden et al. 2019; Yaeger and Robin 2004).



While there are obvious differences between the social extremes – apical elites who ruled polities on the one hand and the poorest of subsistence farmers on the other – it remains far more challenging to identify “the point in archaeological space where these two social units meet, but do not overlap” (Lohse and Valdez 2004:4). One helpful way to address this problem is through the concept of “intermediate elites,” defined by Elson and Covey (2006:2) as “those individuals whose status lies between the rulers of a polity and the stratum of commoners.” Documenting and explaining variability among these intermediary people are important goals of this special issue of *The Mayanist*. By identifying their daily practices, political strategies, and social relationships, we can better understand how intermediate elites influenced the institutions that structured ancient Maya social, political, and economic life. This article contributes to this goal by presenting results from investigations at an intermediate elite architectural group at Yaxnohcah, Campeche, called Ximbal Che. We hypothesize that Ximbal Che was the site of an intermediate elite residential corporate group that played a critical role in the socioeconomic integration of its surrounding neighborhood by organizing and administering the Sakjol marketplace located next door. While our research is ongoing, if true, our investigations at Ximbal Che offer an example of a relationship between intermediate elites and Classic period Maya market institutions.

### **Classic Maya Intermediate Elites**

The study of intermediate elites, particularly as they operated as members of social, political, and economic institutions within historically contingent community settings, has become a productive avenue for understanding processes of social integration in ancient Maya societies (Arnauld et al. 2013; Burham, this issue; Jackson 2003; Masson and Peraza Lope 2004; Munson and Scholnick

2021; Robin et al. 2014; Walden, this issue; Walden et al. 2019). Research on this topic has been instrumental in improving our knowledge of how power and decision-making were shared, how planning and policies were implemented, and how institutions developed and operated on a day-to-day basis.

As political domains grew in size and complexity, apical elites appeared to have sanctioned more administrative positions, filling these with loyal officeholders, possibly as part of an intentional political strategy of bureaucratization (Foiás 2013:127-133; Inomata 2001; Jackson 2013). Relatively high-ranking, often courtly individuals, may have held titles including *ti'sakhuun* (“speaker of/for the white headband”), *ajk'uhuun* (“worshipper”) and *sajal*, a title interpreted as belonging to a governor of urban districts within major capitals or their satellite centers (Houston and Inomata 2009; Jackson and Stuart 2001; Jackson 2013; Martin 2020; Zender 2004). Less commonly identified are *lakam*, who were lower-ranking individuals who held administrative positions with diverse roles and duties, including as diplomats or political emissaries (“standard bearers”) or possibly as neighbourhood heads, engaging in tasks such as managing the collection of tribute and organizing warriors (Freidel et al. 2017; Lacadena 2008; Tsukamoto et al. 2015). At El Palmar, Campeche, the fortuitous discovery of a hieroglyphic stairway at an outlying residential group identified the complex as home to Ajpach' Waal, who possessed the *lakam* title (Ceballos et al. this volume; Cerezo-Román and Tsukamoto 2021; Tsukamoto et al. 2015; Tsukamoto 2020).

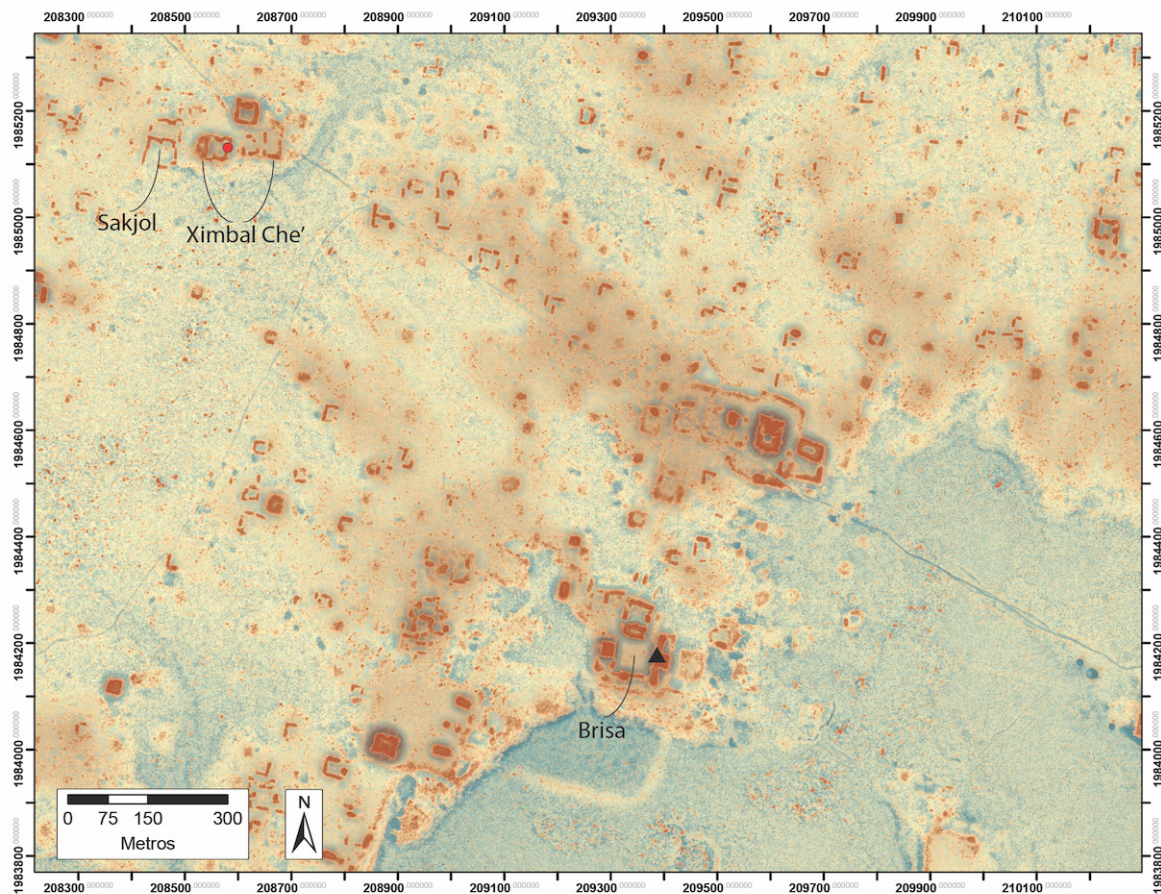
In the absence of identifying insignia, researchers have more typically relied on indirect and inferential approaches to identifying intermediate elites. For example, minor centers – heterogeneous middle-level settlements at the top of hinterland settlement hierarchies – have long been associated with a relatively powerful class of wealthy rural elites (Connell 2003; see also Bullard 1960; Haviland 1981; Willey et al. 1965). More recently, Walden and colleagues (2019) identified several internal social tiers within the Belize River Valley using multivariate analysis of architectural traits, two of which are interpreted to represent intermediate elites. These groups are associated with minor centers resembling down-scaled polity capitals, including large, specialized multi-component centers with ballcourts, causeways, termini groups, and multiple plazas (Group 2), and smaller residential and ceremonial centers centred around a single plaza, resembling up-scaled commoner domestic courtyard groups (Group 3; Walden et al. 2019:9). The people who lived in these latter settlements are interpreted to have engaged in integrative practices such as ancestor veneration, involving commoners in ritual events and ceremonies, and acting as neighborhood heads, presumably similar to *lakam*. At Uxul in Campeche, Els Barnard (2021) has similarly identified a partially stratified social system with a distinct intermediate social tier by coupling analysis of artifact distributions with statistical tools for identifying wealth inequality.

Archaeological studies have also identified intermediate elite production and consumption practices and activities. Although most craft production was part-time and dispersed across households (Chase and Chase 2004; Masson and Peraza Lope 2004; Sheets 2000), manufacturing prestige goods required masterful skill and access to special knowledge. In certain cases, these producer roles may have been fulfilled by intermediate elites. For instance, at Aguateca, excavations of rapidly abandoned households of some of the highest-ranking courtiers identified residents as highly adept artisans producing ornaments, mosaic mirrors, and elaborate polychrome vessels (Inomata et al. 2002; Inomata and Triadan 2010). At Cancuén, jade and pyrite objects were produced through a





Figure 1. Location of Yaxnohcah. Map by PABAL.



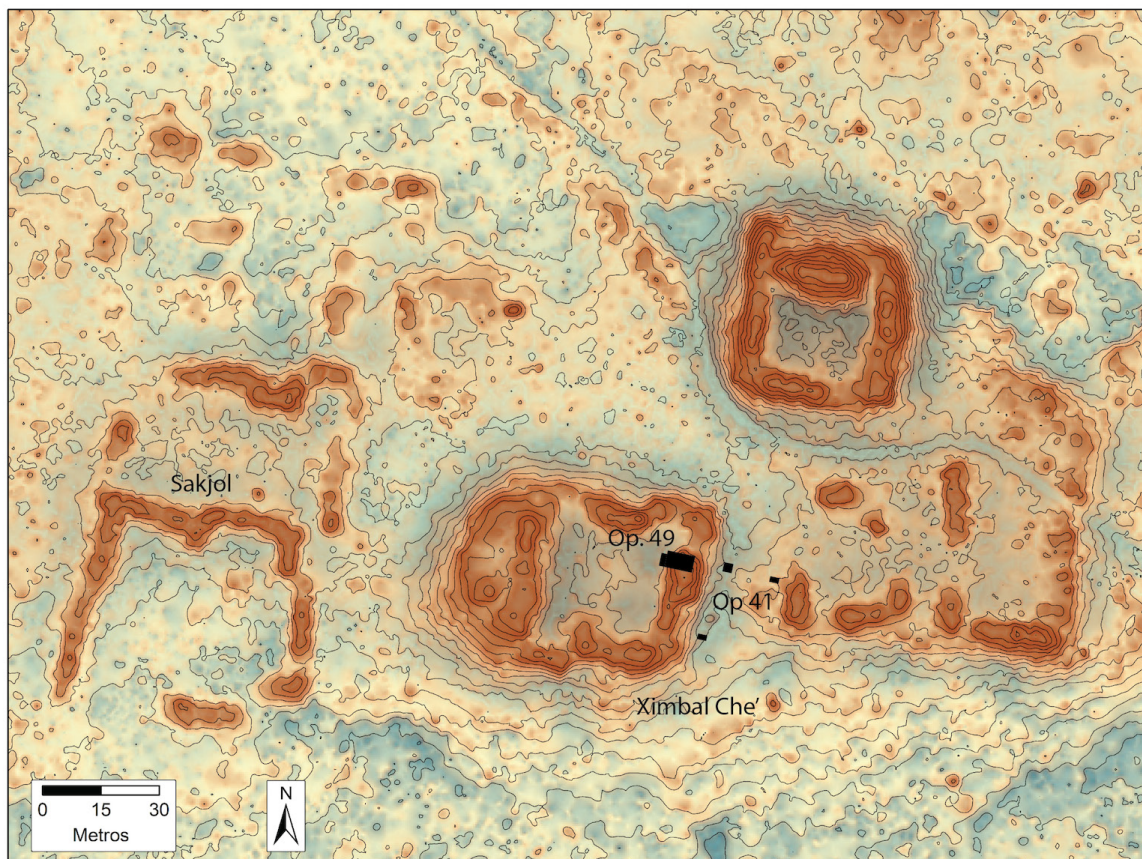
**Figure 2.** Map of Yaxnohcah, showing the location of Ximbal Che relative to Brisa. Base map created by Shane Montgomery.

status-based division of labour. While the initial shaping of jade objects was conducted in relatively humble residences, final production, including incision and carving – practices that transformed these objects from mundane to sacred – took place in high-status, likely intermediate elite, households (Kovacevich 2013, 2017).

### **Case Study: Archaeological Investigations at Ximbal Che**

Yaxnohcah is located in southern Campeche, on the central karst plateau of the Yucatan peninsula, approximately 21 km southeast of the Classic period site center of Calakmul (Figure 1). For over a decade, the Proyecto Arqueológico Bajo Laberinto (PABAL) has been studying urban processes at Yaxnohcah, using various methodologies, including LiDAR prospection, ground verification, and archaeological investigation (Anaya Hernández et al. 2021; Brewer and Carr 2022; Reese-Taylor and Anaya Hernández 2013; Reese-Taylor et al. 2016; Vásquez et al. 2022). These studies have revealed a sequence of sedentary occupation, spanning 1000 BC to AD 1400, which





**Figure 3.** Map of Ximbal Che in relation to the Sakjol Marketplace, showing the location of excavation units. Base map created by Shane Montgomery.

included dynamic periods of urban growth and development during the Middle (1000-400 BC) and Late Preclassic (400 BC-AD 200), as well as during the Late Classic (AD 550-900). A LiDAR survey shows that settlement at Yaxnohcah extends over 40 km<sup>2</sup> in areas of natural elevation surrounded by a complex system of wetlands with surface streams, including the *bajos* El Laberinto to the north, and El Tomatal, located south of the main civic-ceremonial precinct called Brisa, where Yaxnohcah's only E-group is located (Reese-Taylor et al. 2016).

The focus of this article, Ximbal Che, is an intermediate elite architectural group located in a Classic period neighbourhood 1.25 km northwest of Yaxnohcah's central Brisa complex (Figure 2). This neighbourhood, like several others documented at Yaxnohcah, was connected to the civic-ceremonial center via a *sacbe* and featured urban infrastructure including reservoirs and multi-household water tanks (Brewer 2018; Brewer and Carr 2022), temple groups, as well as permanent "built marketplaces" (*sensu* Becker 2015) that served the needs of local vendors, producers, and community members (Anaya Hernández et al. 2021; Ruhl et al. 2018). Directly west of Ximbal Che is the Sakjol marketplace (Figure 3), a site that has been a focus of investigations by PABAL (Anaya Hernández and Radford 2016; Anaya Hernández et al. 2021; Parrott 2020). To contextualize our

case study, we provide a summary of research from Sakjol before proceeding to our description of Ximbal Che.

### *Sakjol*

The Sakjol marketplace is comprised of two contiguous plazas, Sakjol Norte (2081 m<sup>2</sup>) and Sakjol Sur (2565 m<sup>2</sup>), both formally bounded on four sides by low (less than 2 m high) narrow platforms that feature two corner entryways, one having a more ample opening for greater access (Anaya Hernández et al. 2021:133-134). In addition, there may be a third, less formal plaza with very low, eroded mounds at the northern margin of the group. One of several proposed marketplaces at Yaxnohcah, Sakjol had an approximate service area radius of 1.25 km with minimal overlap with other markets (Anaya Hernández et al. 2021:137). This spatial distribution is markedly similar to the termini markets at Caracol (Chase and Chase 2014:243).

Shovel tests (35 cm<sup>3</sup>) on a ten-meter-grid in Sakjol Norte documented several areas of high concentrations of artifacts (>350 per cubic meter), with an average artifact density of 507 per cubic meter and a median of 431 per cubic meter (Anaya Hernández et al. 2021:136). These densities are comparable to those encountered by Cap (2015) in the East Plaza marketplace, Buenavista del Cayo. Analyses of lithics from two 1.5 x 1 m excavation units in the north and south plazas, respectively, found that occupation/use contexts had a higher frequency of middle and late-stage lithic reduction flakes and a higher frequency of flakes with minimal or no cortex than fill contexts (Parrott 2021:97-99). While some early-stage lithic debris was documented (e.g., tested cobbles, primary flakes), these appear in relatively low quantities. Parrott (2021:97) interprets this pattern as indicating that “a diverse array of lithic tool production activities/stages were conducted within the Sakjol marketplace ranging from raw material nodule testing to end-stage bifacial lithic tool production,” although at a lesser scale than would be observed in a workshop or a production area.

### *Ximbal Che*

Ximbal Che consists of four patio-focused groups of differing sizes and complexity, three of which share a large basal platform: a courtyard complex next to the marketplace and two secondary patio groups to the east (Figure 3). The courtyard complex sits on an elevated platform (about 2 m tall) and consists of at least nine platform structures between 0.5 and 2 m in height. Formal entry was gained via a wide staircase leading up to a broad landing that overlooks the marketplace to the west. Upon ascending this platform, visitors would pass between two structures, one of which appears to have had a masonry vault, and enter a large, open courtyard (approximately 840 m<sup>2</sup>). At least one other entrance on the eastern edge of the courtyard complex leads down towards the two smaller secondary patio groups, consisting of low platform structures oriented around small courtyards. To the north, a prominent quadrangle sits atop a 3 m high basal platform bounded on three sides by low mounds, and to its north by a large and likely vaulted structure at least 3.5 m tall. Yaxnohcah’s northwest *sacbe*, an important traffic artery that leads to the Brisa complex, intersects with Ximbal Che, integrating this space into the urban fabric of this sprawling city.

Our investigations have targeted the courtyard complex next to the marketplace, where we have excavated one of its most significant structures (Structure 2; Longstaffe 2022) and systematically



Date Range	Period	Uaxactun Ceramic Complex	Yaxnohcah Ceramic Complex
AD 1000–1550	Postclassic	-	Luch
AD 850–1000	Late Classic	Tepeu III	Xikinche’
AD 650–850		Tepeu II	Early Tux
AD 550–650		Tepeu I	Late Tux
AD 200–550	Early Classic	Tzakol	Kiwi’
200 BC–AD 200	Late Preclassic	Chicanel	Wob
400–200 BC			Chay
650–400 BC	Middle Preclassic	Mamom	Um
800–650 BC		Pre-Mamom	Late Macal
1000–800 BC			Early Macal

**Table 1.** Yaxnohcah ceramic sequence (adapted from Walker 2020:239, fig 10.1).

placed 40 x 40 cm shovel test excavations on a 5 x 5 m grid in its courtyard (32 test pits total), excavated down to the level of the plaza surface. We have also conducted test excavations between the courtyard complex and the secondary patio groups to the east (Longstaffe 2020; Figure 3). The aim of these (and future) investigations is to generate a multifaceted and chronologically sensitive archaeological database for documenting practices and activities and to study the evolution of the socioeconomic strategy of the Ximbal Che Maya. We especially want to identify material patterns that might connect their activities to the Sakjol marketplace. We have not undertaken excavations in the quadrangle group to the north. Below, we synthesize preliminary findings from our investigations to offer a glimpse into the developmental history of Ximbal Che and highlight shifts in the integrative strategies of its inhabitants over time.

### *Emergence, Growth, and Apogee of Intermediate Elites*

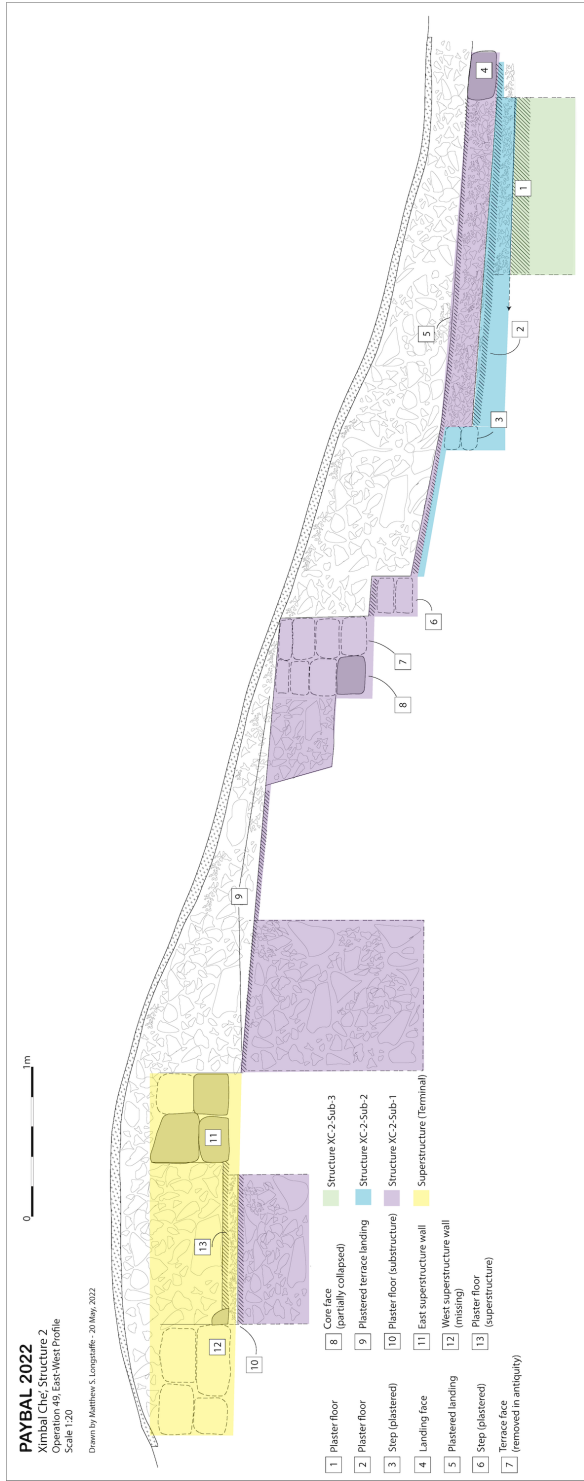
The earliest evidence of occupation around Ximbal Che consists of pottery recovered from a mixed fill deposit buried under the group’s basal platform, which belongs to the Late Middle Preclassic (650-400 BC) Um ceramic complex (Table 1). We do not, however, have concrete evidence for platform architecture at Ximbal Che before the Late Preclassic (200 BC-AD 200). On the eastern side of the courtyard complex, in front of Structure 2, builders deposited a 10-20 cm thick refuse layer directly atop the bedrock containing sherds from the Wob ceramic complex (Table 1). A radiocarbon date recovered from a charcoal sample at the bottom of this fill provides a *terminus post quem* for this incipient construction of cal 170 BC to AD 10 (2075 ± 30, 2-sigma; LEMA-1953),

or the middle of the Late Preclassic period. Two boulder and cobble fills were subsequently placed atop this refuse, levelling out the undulating bedrock to provide a solid construction core, which was then capped with 20-30 cm of tamped *sascab* and surfaced with a very thick (10-20 cm) layer of lime plaster (XC-2-Sub 3; Figures 4 & 5). Interestingly, this platform had a north-south primary axis and sloped up towards the north, starkly contrasting with later iterations of Structure 2. At, or near, the top of this platform, we documented a large post-hole (~25 cm x 25 cm) cut through the plaster floor and underlying layer of tamped *sascab* (Figure 6).

The Late Preclassic artifact assemblage derives from secondary construction fill contexts. These materials – likely gathered from nearby middens and then deposited into the platform during the construction process (Hayden and Cannon 1983) – provide us with some insights into the practices and activities of the people residing in the area around Ximbal Che at this time. This assemblage includes artifacts such as everyday utilitarian objects, including ceramics, chipped-stone tools and debitage (e.g., expedient bifaces, unifaces, drills, and utilized flakes), *metates*, and obsidian blades. We also recovered a few examples of worked and unworked marine shell, speleothems, and a quartz crystal. This assemblage is typical of an incipient subsistence-focused homestead engaged in cooking, serving, and storage, small-scale production of chipped-stone tool manufacture, and other intermittent craft production, possibly involving the drilling and incising of marine shell. Direct material evidence for ritual practice is scarce, although the quartz crystal and speleothems may relate to rituals associated with water, rainfall, and fertility (Brady and Prufer 2005; Moyes and Brady 2012). A few meters east of Structure 2, we documented a layer of rich, dark brown to black organic soil deposited on the bedrock beneath the later basal platform. These soils, which may have been used as mortar to level the bedrock (Rice et al. 2018) or were part of a small household garden, were likely transported from a *bajo*, although additional tests are required to show this was indeed the case (Hansen et al. 2002; Hiquet et al. 2021:147).

At the onset of the Early Classic (Kiwí' complex; AD 200-550; Table 1), there were extraordinary changes in the configuration of Ximbal Che. At this time, the basal platform was raised and expanded, as evidenced by Early Classic construction fills without a Late Preclassic antecedent, and the north-south platform (XC-2-Sub 3) was buried under a layer of marl and cobble fill to facilitate the construction of a new, larger platform (XC-2-Sub 2; Figure 4). Notably, the primary axis of this platform was shifted to an east-west alignment, orienting its face inwards to the newly constructed Ximbal Che courtyard complex. While our excavations only revealed a small portion of this platform, we know it was plastered and likely had two levels, as evidenced by a two-course high step documented at the eastern end of the excavation unit [3]; an additional step was documented further east [6], possibly representing the top of this platform (note: numbers in brackets signify features labelled on Figure 4).

The final form of the Structure 2 substructure (XC-2-Sub 1) was built in two renovation events, the first of which was during the Early Tux facet of the Late Classic (AD 550-650; Table 1; Figure 4). At this time, a plastered landing was added at the base of the structure, extending approximately two meters east from the front face of the landing [4] and over top of the earlier platform [5]. An earlier step was left intact [6], abutting a newly installed 60-cm-high terrace face [7], the apex of which marked the top of this plastered platform [9]. Lacking a staircase, access to the platform was likely achieved via the axial stair of the adjoining range structure to the south, which would only



**Figure 4.** Excavated section of Ximbal Che Structure 2 (east-west profile, facing south). Color overlays show different phases of construction. Drawing by M.S. Longstaffe.



**Figure 5.** Photo of Late Preclassic tamped sascab and plaster floor of Structure XC-2-Sub 3.  
Photo by M.S. Longstaffe.

require a short series of north-south steps to access the terrace landing. The second renovation event, dating to the Late Tux facet of the Late Classic (AD 650-850; Table 1), extended this platform further east at the height of the frontal terrace, creating a long and broad platform [10]. There is no evidence to support the presence of a masonry room atop this platform, but it presumably held a perishable roof or awning of some kind. Around this time, Ximbal Che's basal platform was again raised and expanded.

A final major renovation was undertaken at the summit of the terminal substructure during the Late Tux facet of the Late Classic, adding a masonry superstructure with fine ashlar walls [11] (Figure 7). Partial excavations of this superstructure exposed the walls and a raised interior floor [13] of a room measuring 1.4 m wide and extending beyond the 4 m length of the excavation unit. The superstructure was vaulted, as evidenced by the thickness of the walls (~0.8 m) relative to the narrowness of the room, as well as the documentation of many large vault stones on and around the mound (Gilbert 2020). One entrance was documented along the front face of the superstructure near its northern end, the threshold of which sat 20 cm above the surface of the terrace landing. Presuming the structure was symmetrical, there was likely a second entrance further south, just outside the margins of the excavation unit. Unfortunately, we could not expand the unit's size to test this assumption due to a large tree. No residential features, such as masonry benches or room dividing walls, were documented within the excavated portion of this room.

Classic period artifacts stem from various secondary contexts, including sealed construction





**Figure 6.** Photo of posthole associated with Late Preclassic platform (Structure XC-2-Sub 3) at Structure 2 (before [top] and after [bottom] excavation). Photos by M.S. Longstaffe.

fills, unsealed architectural fall and collapse, and refuse deposits collected off the eastern edge of the courtyard complex. Apart from one example of an abandonment-related on-floor assemblage (discussed below), we have yet to encounter primary contexts such as burials or caches at Ximbal Che. Generally, the Classic period artifact assemblage is larger and more diverse than earlier periods but exhibits a continued concern with meeting basic domestic needs, despite the observed increased architectural complexity. This assemblage includes a high proportion of utilitarian pottery, lithic debitage from different stages of the reduction process, utilized flake tools, formal chipped-stone tools including celts, bifaces, choppers, drills, and scrapers, obsidian prismatic blades, and *manos* and *metates*. In addition, several examples of centrally perforated ceramic or ground stone discs that may be spindle whorls (Chase et al.

2008; Halperin 2008) were recovered from fill and unsealed contexts.

In terms of ceramic types, the Early Classic Kiwi' assemblages are standard, reflecting the widespread nature of the Tzakol ceramic sphere throughout the Maya lowlands at this time (Figure 8). Interestingly, however, our excavations recovered types and varieties not previously identified at Yaxnohcah, such as sherds from the Ciricote group (common at Calakmul), Discordia Black, and San Clemente Gouge-incised. The ensuing Early Tux (AD 550-650) and Late Tux (AD 650-850) ceramic assemblages are likewise among the most diverse recovered at Yaxnohcah. This observation is intriguing as it may imply that the Ximbal Che Maya had unfettered access to many types and forms of vessels, possibly because of their hypothesized patron relationship with the Sakjol marketplace. We intend to explore this idea further through contextual analysis of pottery recovered from



**Figure 7.** Ximbal Che, Structure 2, Terminal Architecture: (a) exposed portion of masonry wall of the superstructure, facing east; (b) terrace landing, showing possible cut through plaster and superstructure room. Photos by M.S. Longstaffe.

Ximbal Che and distributional studies of residential contexts elsewhere at Yaxnohcah to evaluate differences in access patterns (e.g., Chase and Chase 2014:245; Hutson et al. 2017:257-266) and to assess intra-site diversity (e.g., Wurtzburg 1991:206-220). Most of these ceramics are utilitarian wares, although some signal prestige, suggesting other non-market-based exchange processes may





**Figure 8.** Examples of Classic period pottery recovered from excavations at Ximbal Che: (a) Langostino Red Bowl (Early Tux); (b) Tres Mujeres Incised Carinated Bowl (Late Tux); (c) Large neck jar (Late Tux); (d) Dos Hermanos Red Globular jar (Kiwi). Photos by D.S. Walker.

also be at play. These include, for example, a Cabrito Cream Polychrome vase fragment with relic polychrome painting – a type generally attributed to the eastern Peten and rare in Yaxnohcah – recovered from a midden off the eastern edge of Structure 2 and a large sherd with well-preserved painted iconography from a Palmar Orange Polychrome vase recovered in association with boulder and cobble debris spilled out from the collapsed platform terrace (Figure 9).

### Termination of Structure 2

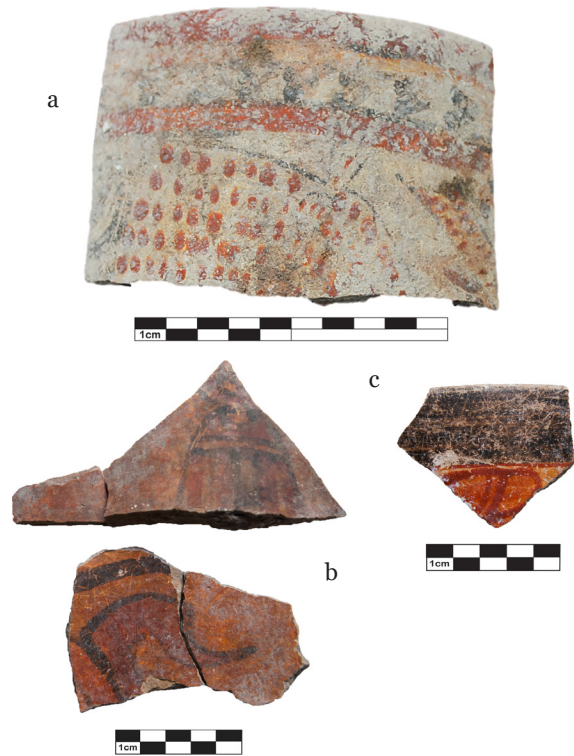
We have no evidence of continued occupation at Ximbal Che beyond the Late Tux facet of the Late Classic period, suggesting the group was abandoned before the onset of the Xikinche' complex (AD 850-1000; Table 1). Our investigations suggest, however, that this group's inhabitants carefully planned this process. Before abandonment, Structure 2 appears to have been emptied of most of its contents, and its superstructure and substructure were swept clean. The only *in situ* artifacts documented on-floor from terminal occupation contexts were fragments of a *metate* left leaning against the doorjamb of the masonry superstructure entrance (Figure 10). This was possibly deposited as part of a structure termination ritual aimed at physically and symbolically blocking access to the room (Lamoureux-St-Hilaire et al. 2015; Sion 2016:339). In addition, outside on the terrace landing, we excavated an intrusive semi-circular cut in the plaster floor next to the southern margin

of the superstructure doorway devoid of artifacts (Figure 7). We suspect this feature once housed a cache but was removed by Ximbal Che’s inhabitants as part of the abandonment process.

The vaulted masonry superstructure of Structure 2 appears to have collapsed not long after abandonment, as evidenced by the well-preserved plaster floors of its superstructure and areas of the exterior landing abutting its masonry walls. Interestingly, all the facing stones from the terrace of the terminal substructure appear to have been removed in antiquity, likely stone-robbled soon after Ximbal Che was abandoned. Only the basal course of the core face remained *in situ*, still in alignment behind where the terrace face would have been constructed [8]. Upper sections of the core face had subsequently collapsed, spilling the construction core out of the platform onto the landing below; no cut stones were noted in this pile of rubble.

## Discussion

The nature of Ximbal Che – including its material inventories, overall configuration and complexity, the quality of architecture, and the timing of construction – suggests that during the Classic period, the group may be best described as the site of an intermediate elite residential corporate group (Hayden and Cannon 1982; see also Gillespie 2000; Hyde 2014). The residential corporate group pattern is often attributed to the linking of multiple nuclear and extended families with common descent ties, with one family holding an elevated social position over the others and maintaining control over the group’s social, political, and economic endeavours. As such, residential corporate groups typically manifest materially as multiple residential and ancillary structures, centred on open-air patios that likely served as activity areas (Ashmore 1981:48-50), with one “first tier” group that is larger and more formal than others, reflecting a “special purpose” role (Lohse 2004:130). In Maya studies, corporate groups are often associated with a common reliance on a limited-scale agricultural and water resource base (Dunning 2004; Hageman and Lohse 2003; Vogt 1970). More broadly, however, they are best described as localized, hierarchically organized social units (Hayden and Cannon 1982) that may engage in various integrative socioeconomic strategies and practices beyond those related to subsistence.



**Figure 9.** Examples of Classic period painted pottery recovered from Ximbal Che: (a) Palmar Orange Polychrome (Late Tux); (b) Palmar Orange Polychrome (Late Tux); (c) Saxche Orange Polychrome (Early Tux). Photos by M.S. Longstaffe (a) and D.S. Walker (b-c).





**Figure 10.** Metate recovered from the doorway of the masonry superstructure, in situ (top) and after excavation (bottom). Photos by M.S. Longstaffe.

### *The Integrative Strategies of Ximbal Che*

Initially, we hypothesized that Structure 2 functioned as an eastern ancestor shrine based on its surface configuration (Becker 2003; Hageman and Lohse 2003; Palka 1997). Eastern ancestor shrines are a regular feature of domestic compounds at some centers in the eastern Maya lowlands, most notably at Caracol, where 70% of residential groups likely contain a shrine (Chase

and Chase 2017). They are, however, much less prevalent in the southern Peten and the Central Karstic Uplands. At Tikal, for instance, Becker (2004:129) estimates that only 14% of residential groups had an eastern shrine. Our extensive excavations at Structure 2 returned no evidence for ancestor-based rituals. Thus, in the absence of mortuary assemblages or other ritual deposits, it appears that ancestor veneration was not the function of Structure 2 (McAnany 1995). Instead, the northern, more monumental quadrangle was likely the focal point of this corporate group's ritual and mortuary activities.

Beyond basic subsistence activities such as chipped stone tool manufacture, cooking, storage, and possibly some intermittent crafting involving weaving and cloth production, our data provide few indicators of intensive craft specialization, suggesting they were not likely vendor-producers for the marketplace or other types of exchange. Instead, we suspect they were integrated into the marketplace system through administrative means, perhaps as managers of the Sakjol neighborhood marketplace. This hypothesis aligns well with the idea that provisioning urban services through socioeconomic institutions like marketplaces required the creation of positions within Maya society to tend to bureaucratic matters and record keeping, many of which were likely filled by a burgeoning social subset of intermediate elites (ASZ Chase 2021; Foias 2013:127-133; ML Smith 2018:305-307). If correct, Structure 2, in conjunction with its attached range structure to the south, was likely part of this administrative apparatus.

We find support for this hypothesis by analyzing Ximbal Che's built environment. Many identified marketplaces are positioned to intersect with adjacent elite residential compounds (Anaya Hernández et al. 2021; Chase et al. 2015:247; Ruhl et al. 2018; Shaw and King 2015:181), suggesting they had administrative control over these facilities to some degree. In this regard, the broad summit with an outset terrace overlooking the market may have been designed to facilitate supervision, including activities such as controlling access, maintaining order, adjudicating disputes, and collecting tax or other payments from market participants (King 2015; Masson and Freidel 2013:207; Shaw 2012). Some have argued that these types of specialized roles, along with other administrative duties – such as liaising with political authorities, scheduling, and accounting – were critical for the successful operation of these socioeconomic institutions (Eppich and Freidel 2015; Freidel et al. 2017; King 2015:170-171; Paris et al. 2021:59; Shaw 2012; Tokovinine and Beliaev 2013).

In the absence of textual records, the archaeological record of the Maya provides little detailed information about the inner workings of socioeconomic institutions like marketplaces (Longstaffe 2021). Following Holland-Lulewicz and colleagues (2020:1), it is important to remember that institutions, at least in the sense that we have employed the term, are “organizations of *people* that carry out objectives using regularized practices and norms, labor, and resources” (emphasis added). While it is difficult to identify direct relationships between people and marketplaces using archaeological evidence alone, especially those activities and practices related to organizing and administering these institutions (Hudson 2004; Masson and Freidel 2013; Shaw 2012), this is one of the aims of our ongoing research at Yaxnohcah. Clearly, more work remains to be done to test our hypotheses and refine our interpretations. More broadly, if we can better characterize marketplace institutions as they existed at different times and places, we will be on our way to developing a more nuanced understanding of the variable ways Maya economic systems were organized and operated. The research presented here is a first step towards achieving these ambitious goals.



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