

CHAPTER 8: THE EXCAVATION OF GROUP C, ZACPETÉN

Group C rests on a hill in the southern part of the peninsula, approximately 30 m above Lake Salpetén. The core of the group is composed of a small temple assemblage, around which are concentrated numerous house platforms. Most of the buildings in the ceremonial area and two of the house mounds were excavated. The latter structures are discussed in Chapter 9. The ceremonial area is accessed by two stairways, one to the north and another to the west (Figure 8-1). The focal point of the group is Str. 764, the temple, which lies in the medial position on the east edge of the platform and faces west. North of the temple is Str. 1002, probably an oratorio, which also faces west. At a right angle to and south of Str. 764 is Str. 767, an open hall facing north. In front of the temple lies Str. 766A, a long low shrine, and Str. 766B, an altar. These five buildings combine all of the necessary elements in the proper pattern to form a Mayapán-style temple assemblage. However, the Petén version of the assemblage is completed by the presence of Str. 765, a raised shrine, on the northern side of the plaza (Pugh et al. 1997).

The most complete history of the plaza is found in Test Unit 892, 296 in Str. 767 (Figure 7-2). The uppermost floor in the unit is that of Str. 767 (Floor 1). This floor is contemporaneous with the final or fourth plaza surface. The third plaza surface (Floor 2) lies upon a Postclassic fill (Level 5) that rests upon the second plaza surface (Floor 3). This floor, in turn, lies upon a Terminal Classic fill (Level 6 and 7). Below Level 7 rests the first plaza surface (Floor 4), which was constructed upon a mixed, Postclassic and

Terminal Classic, fill of large limestone rubble that lay upon bedrock. This fill was disturbed by a burial cist (Burial 767-1) extending into the southern wall of the unit. It was likely a Postclassic burial. Human remains were found within, but were not completely excavated because the wall of the unit appeared dangerously unstable. A similar burial cist was encountered deep in the 1994 Test Unit 5 in Group C. Since Level 7 did not contain Postclassic materials, the burial pit likely widened at the base extending into and contaminated Level 8, which contained Postclassic materials. The earliest three floors (Floor 2 to 4) appear to have been plaza surfaces.

Access Points

Group C was formally accessed by two stairways, one on the northern side of the plaza and the other to the west. North of the northeast corner of Str. 765 lies the northern access point, a large well-preserved stairway leading down to a natural terrace of the hill upon which Group C rests (Figure 8-3). This stairway is oriented 357° east of north. A 37-m² excavation uncovered 100% of the stairway. There are no balustrades, but the edges are lined with limestone rubble that was flush with the natural surface. The 20 stairs are composed of hard limestone rubble slabs. This stairway negotiates only the upper 3.2 m of the hill and a very steep 16 m remain to be descended to arrive at the saddle between Groups A and C. The stairway that led down the remainder of the hill was not discernible from surface observation.

Concentrations of chert debitage and flakes, obsidian blades, miscellaneous ceramics, bone, and shell were encountered at the base of the northern stairway. This was either a refuse dumping area or a place where materials naturally eroded off the plaza of

Group C to settle upon the flat natural terrace. Without further evidence, the latter scenario appears more convincing, as the central access point to the Group seems an odd place to deposit refuse.

The western access to Group C is located north of the western arm of Str. 767 (Figure 8-1). This stairway is much smaller and cruder than the one to the north. It leads down to a lower terrace, 2.01 m below the level of the plaza of Group C. It has nine steps, but does not appear to have balustrades. The natural terrace upon which the western stairway descends was most likely the original level of Group C before the construction of the plaza. The western edge of this lower “natural” terrace appears to have been artificially retained and may have held a structure. No notable artifact concentrations were found on the western stairway.

Str. 764

Str. 764 is centered upon the eastern edge of the plaza of Group C (Figure 8-1) and faces due west (Figure 8-4 and 8-5). It is in the same position as a temple in a temple assemblage at Mayapán. Str. 764 is composed of a multi-terraced substructure topped by a five-doorway superstructure. Within the superstructure are a medial altar, L-shaped bench, and an interior altar/wall. A 373-m² excavation uncovered 100% of Str. 764. A fragment of wood in wall collapse behind the building was dated with AMS dating (Beta-112318)(Table 1-1) and was found to have a conventional radiocarbon age of 585 ± 45 years before present (Table 6-2). The two sigma (95% probability) calibrated date for the same is A.D. 1299 to 1419.

In sum, Str. 767 was relatively clean of artifacts and does not appear to have been a primary location of censer use. Crystals and stone phalli were associated with the structure. The latter have been only found in this building type in Postclassic Petén.

Group C Summary

The central plaza in Group C appears to have been constructed in the Postclassic period. Terminal Classic strata exist in the base of some test units, but this material may have been brought in as fill from elsewhere. The plaza was built directly upon exposed bedrock some of which was burned by *milpa* or dedication fires. The layout of Group C closely follows the plan for a Mayapán temple assemblage. The central building is a temple medially located on the east side of the plaza and faces west. In front of the temple is Str. 766A, an elongated shrine, placed slightly south of the medial axis of the temple, perhaps to allow access to the latter building. Upon this shrine are two rectangular altars and at its western end is a circular altar. Just west of Str. 766A is Str. 766B, a rectangular masonry altar. At a right angle to and south of the temple is an open hall. To the right and facing in the same direction as the temple is Str. 1002, likely an oratorio. A raised shrine, Str. 765, is located in the northwest corner of the plaza facing into the western side of the open hall toward masonry rectangles within the latter structure. The shifted position of the raised shrine and the elongated shrine define the Petén variant of the temple assemblage. A low platform, Str. 1003, stands between Str. 764 and Str. 767, but its function is unknown.

The temple or god house, Str. 764, stood on the highest platform in Group C and faced to the west. It had a medial altar, interior altar, and L-shaped bench. Upon the

floor on the west side of the structure were numerous large effigy censers, perhaps with matching non-effigy censers. The east side of the building held items used for ritual offerings such as cups, large polychrome quincunx cups, and a red slipped drum. Human and animal teeth on the platform may have been offerings to the platform/mountain/earth.

Str. 1002, the oratorio was constructed on a modified outcrop of bedrock. The superstructure of the building was perishable with posts placed into bedrock. The lack of a masonry superstructure on Str. 1002 differentiates the building from Str. 605 and oratorios at Mayapán. This may suggest oratorios held less significance to the people who built Group C than to those who built Group A. Since the majority of this building was not excavated, little is known of its form or use.

Str. 767 is an open hall with a C-shaped bench and filled-in medial niche. Four low masonry rectangles rest in the western side of the building. The largest of the rectangles appears lined up on the medial axis of Str. 765. Str. 767 was relatively clean but small crystals, spindle whorls, and a limestone phallus were found within it.

A raised shrine, Str. 765, faces into the western part of Str. 767. This building was built upon a low platform. The superstructure is small and contains a medial altar. Within the superstructure were paired non-image censers that appear to have replaced an earlier pair found smashed and scattered around the interior. Just west of this building was a small ossuary containing the remains of an adult and child.

Directly in front of the temple was Str. 766, an elongated shrine with a circular altar at its end. This building contained numerous caches. Associated with the elongated shrine were image censer sherds and obsidian blades. To the west of the circular altar was an independent altar. Around this altar were chert bifaces and human remains.

With the exception of Str. 1002 and 1003, all buildings in Group C exhibit evidence of one major modification. The modification of Str. 766 was correlated with the reconstruction of the plaza surface; hence, the entire group appears to have been reconstructed during a major renovation event. Underneath the temple was an earlier building that also faced west. Instead of an elongated shrine, a circular shrine and a rectangular shrine rested in front of this building.

The number of steps in the northern stairway, western stairway, and stairway of Str. 764 may be significant. There are 20 steps in the northern stairway, an important number in Maya calendrics largely based on a vigesimal number system. Nine steps lead up the stairway on the west of the plaza and Str. 764 has 13 steps. The Maya associated these numbers with the Underworld and heavens, respectively. While one might argue that the number of steps was mere happenstance, the Underworld/heaven opposition associated with the west and east sides of the plaza will become clear in the comparison of Group A and Group C, below.

It appears that each building in Group C was the site of specific, rather than generalized, ritual practices. In other words, each was the place of a different type of performance. Again, these variations in behavior reflect different meaning spaces; therefore, each building type likely had a different meaning to the ritual participants. However, the various spaces do not occur separately, but as a whole temple assemblage, which was essentially a system, structure, or configuration of interrelated themes. The stability of the temple assemblage as a stage of ritual action will become apparent in the comparison of Group A and Group C in Chapter 10.