

## 4

# Empowered and Disempowered During the Late to Terminal Classic Transition: Maya Burial and Termination Rituals in the Sibun Valley, Belize

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The *peri-* and *postmortem* treatment of human remains speaks directly to social and political conditions as both Verdery (1999) and Weiss-Krejci (2004) have shown. Unfortunately, the ability of archaeologists and osteologists to correctly link human remains with political and social circumstances has been limited by under-developed and under-applied forensic techniques compounded by the poor preservation of skeletal remains in the humid, tropical Maya lowlands (see Tiesler in this volume, for expanded discussion). Another factor – insufficient analysis of archaeological context – often hinders a full appreciation of the political and social circumstances surrounding the treatment and deposition of human remains. Elsewhere, McAnany (1995) has drawn attention to the methodological ambiguity surrounding the distinction between the remains of human sacrifice and those of protracted, but reverential, mortuary practices. The joint biocultural approach advocated in this volume and followed in this chapter aims to increase the precision of our forensic methods of skeletal analysis while also sharpening the focus of archaeological contexts in which skeletal materials are found.

Two contrastive archaeological contexts – an elaborate mortuary deposit and a collection of human bone that appears to be a conquest-linked termination deposit – form the basis for this study of the treatment of human remains. The contexts were discovered during the excavation phase of the Xibun Archaeological Research Project (XARP) at two Maya sites called Hershey and Pakal Na, both located in the Sibun Valley of Belize. This study emphasizes the critical importance of archaeological context and the profound contribution of Maya ancestral remains to an in-depth understanding of the past. In addition to human remains, iconography, ceramics, and radiocarbon assays are brought to bear on the shifting alliance structure of the Late-to-Terminal Classic transition (ca. AD 700–900) – when the power and reach of the Petén contracted while the northern Yucatec powers expanded.

#### 4.1. The Sibun Valley in Local & Regional Perspective

Positioned in the eastern Maya lowlands (or the Belize Zone), the Sibun Valley is strategically located relative to the highly navigable Inner Channel of the Caribbean Sea (Fig. 4.1). The valley is linked to the Petén – and its many powerful Classic Maya centers, such as Tikal and Naranjo – via the Belize Valley, which is the proximate drainage immediately to the north. The Inner Channel of the Caribbean Sea provides access via maritime transport to northern Yucatec

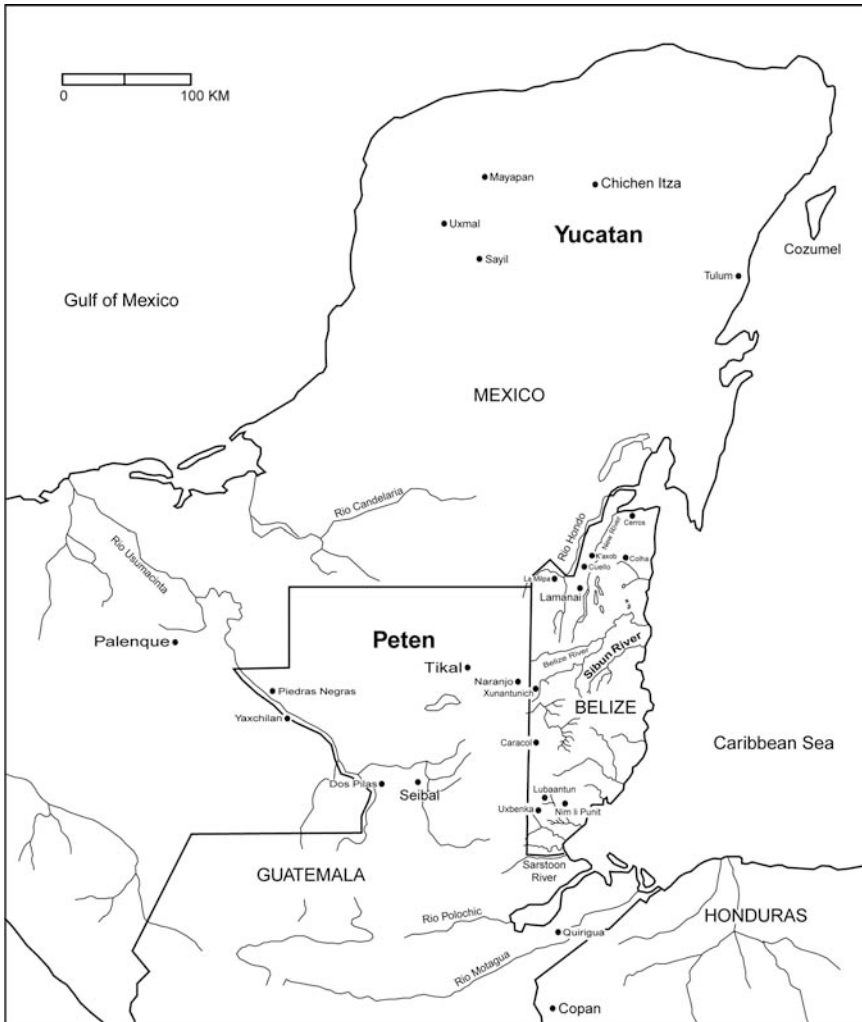


FIGURE 4.1. Map of the Maya area, highlighting the location of the Sibun River Valley. Note the location of Petén and northern Yucatán (map prepared by B. Thomas)

capitals such as Chichén Itzá. Elsewhere, we (McAnany et al., 2002:123) have discussed the political and economic significance of the Caribbean watershed valleys that “supported large populations on soils that were capable of producing highly desirable luxury crops – such as cacao – yet monumental architecture and hieroglyphic texts, *sine qua non* of political power in Classic Maya society, are underrepresented suggesting peripheral political status.” In contrast, the core areas in which Classic Maya royal courts flourished – central Petén and northern Yucatán – were not zones of prolific cacao production. Given the appetite of royal courts for cacao, some type of core–periphery relationship between the Sibun Valley residents and the core areas can be postulated for Classic through Colonial times (Jones, 1989; McAnany, 2004; McAnany et al., 2002:128).

Significantly, the bulk of construction within the valley dates to Late and Terminal Classic times (AD 600–900) with sparse repopulation of the valley during Late Postclassic and Early Colonial times. McAnany and others (2005) have suggested that this settlement history can be attributed, in large part, to the volatile flooding regime of the Sibun River. As such, the valley is not well suited for maize agriculture but sturdier tree crops that can survive the seasonal flooding and then flourish on the soils enriched by the overbank events.

## 4.2. The Hershey Site in the Sibun Valley

The Hershey site, so-named for the surrounding cacao orchard once owned by Hershey Foods, is located at the base of the Maya Mountains in the upper portion of the valley (Fig. 4.2). This site occupied a strategic position in the circum Maya Mountains trade routes (Graham, 1994; McAnany et al., 2002, 2005). Thomas (2005) has noted that Hershey, the largest site in the Sibun Valley, exhibits architectural styles that resemble those of Classic period Petén. Most notable in this respect is a small ballcourt (King, 2004) situated immediately to the southeast of the main pyramid (Fig. 4.3) – an arrangement that is analogous to the Temple 1 plus effigy ballcourt complex of Tikal and more generally to the size and locations of ballcourts at Belize River sites to the northwest, such as Xunantunich and El Pilar (Leventhal and Ashmore, 2004:Fig. 10.1; Ford, 2004: Fig. 15.2).

A pattern of large-scale architecture built within a compressed time frame at Hershey is similar to the tempo of construction at Xunantunich during the Late Classic (see Fig. 4.1). During this time period, carved monuments at Xunantunich indicate that the Petén capital of Naranjo likely controlled this sizeable polity in the Belize River valley (Fields, 2004; Leventhal and Ashmore, 2004). Direct relations between the Belize River area and Naranjo also have been detected at the site of Buenavista, where a polychrome cylinder vase with a hieroglyphic text band identifies the vessel owner as that of a ruler from Naranjo (Houston et al., 1992; Tascheck and Ball, 1992). At the Hershey site in the Sibun, a similar emblem-glyph on an incised sherd was found while cleaning the front façade of the main pyramidal structure in Group B (Morandi, 2004 [Fig. 4.4]). The ceramic sherd bears a portion of the crossed band emblem glyph of Naranjo surmounted by a late

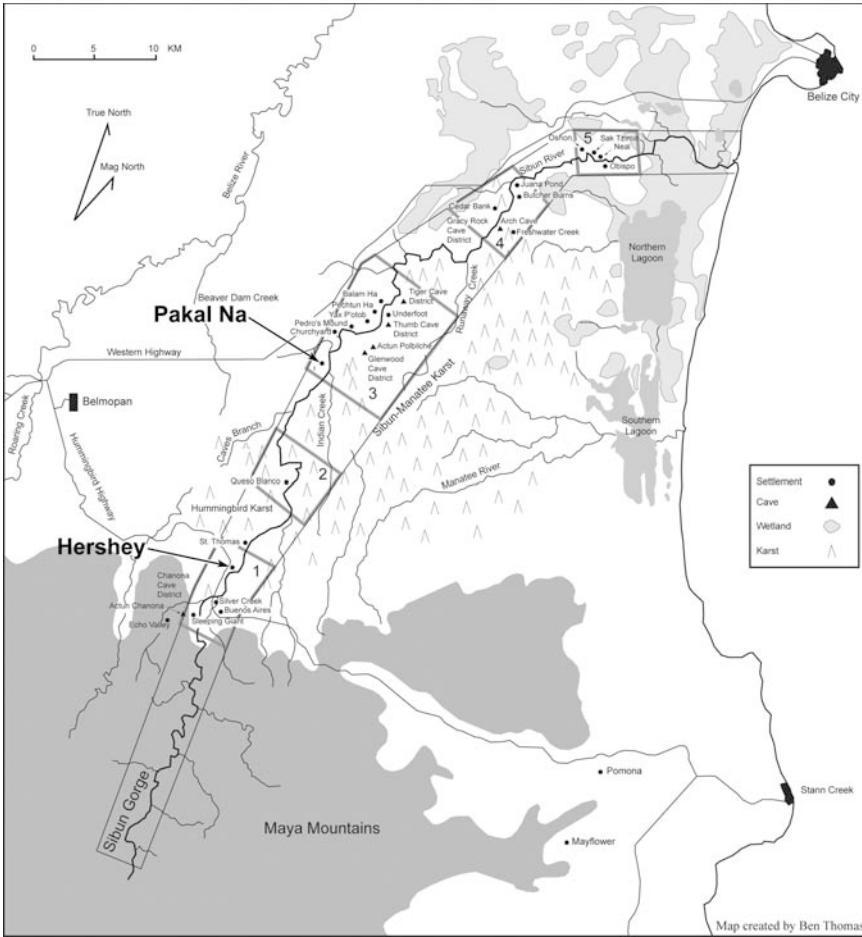


FIGURE 4.2. Map of the Sibun Valley and ancient Maya settlements (map prepared by B. Thomas)

version of the “k’ul ajaw” prefix (Stephen Houston personal communication, 2003). This evidence suggests that the political influence of Naranjo extended to the south of the Belize Valley, perhaps in an effort to control the circum Maya Mountains trade routes and the areas of prolific cacao production.

### 4.3. A Deposit of Terminal Conflict and Disempowerment at Hershey

The Hershey site was the regional center for the upper Sibun Valley and served as the residence for ruling elites who may have originated from the Petén – certainly the pottery shows strong affinities with Petén (Tepeu) ceramic complexes. With

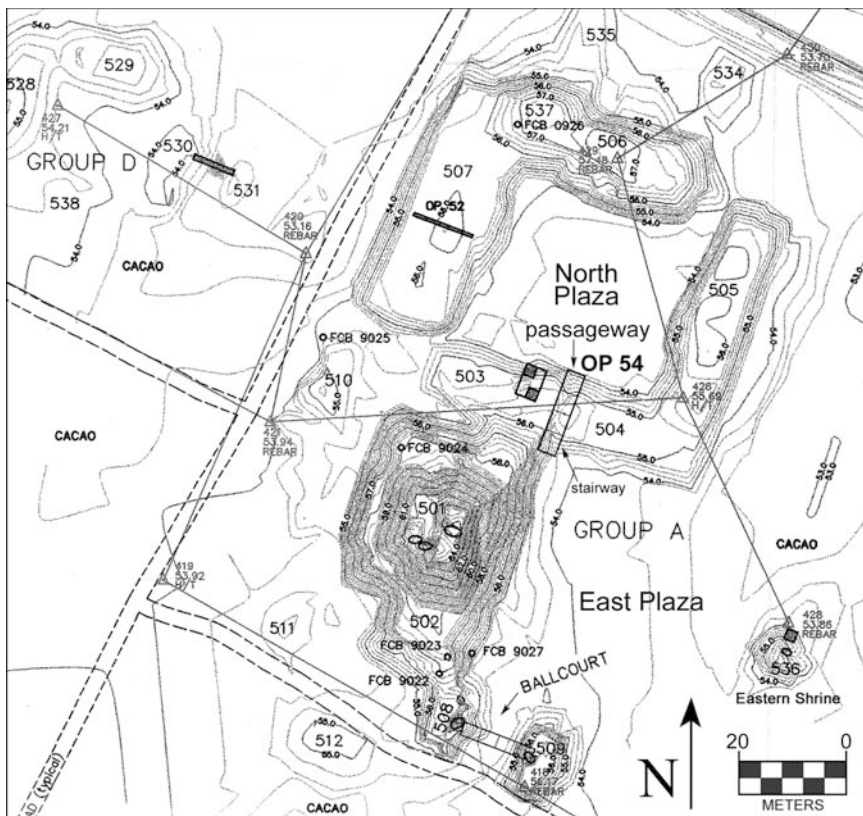


FIGURE 4.3. Map of Group A at Hershey with passageway excavation unit, Operation 54 (after Morandi et al., 2003: Map Sheet 2, modified by E. Harrison-Buck)

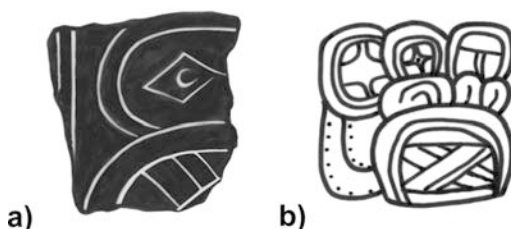


FIGURE 4.4. (a) Ceramic sherd from Hershey with a portion of the Naranjo emblem glyph (illustration by C. Cesario). (b) Naranjo emblem glyph (illustration by E. Harrison-Buck)

the onset of the Classic-period political collapse (ca. AD 800), however, the fulcrum of power shifted and many of the ruling institutions that were central to the Late Classic ideology, centered in the Petén heartland and emulated at sites like Hershey, appear to have lost their vitality. The political turbulence of the Late-Terminal Classic transition – a time when northern Yucatec capitals strengthened as the

influence of the Petén waned – is indicated in poignantly human terms from material excavated in Group A at Hershey (refer to [Figs. 4.3 and 4.5](#)). From a narrow passageway that links the main elite residence (North Plaza) to the ballcourt area (East Plaza), excavators uncovered disarticulated human bone that had been deposited directly beneath the collapse of the passageway masonry (Harrison-Buck and Cesario, 2004). Over 1,200 fragments of human bone were recovered from small clusters situated both on the surface of the elevated corridor and mixed within a 10–15 cm deep layer of debris that covered both the North and East plaza floors adjacent to the passageway. The fact that the skeletal material had been deposited directly on top of the passageway floor suggests that the area was actively maintained when the human remains were placed there. This inference is supported by the results of two AMS radiocarbon assays on charcoal from the passageway. The first sample (AA58926) was directly associated with one of the bone clusters and yielded a 2-sigma calibrated age range of AD 758–891. The second sample (AA58927), originating from the subfloor ballast, yielded a 2-sigma calibrated age range of AD 761–895, and is statistically inseparable from the first date. This finding indicates that very little time elapsed between the uppermost floor construction within the passageway and the scattering of human remains on top of that floor and adjacent plaza surfaces.

While there is evidence of erosion on the bones, along with a good deal of rodent gnawing, the human bone is exceptionally well preserved. From the widely scattered clusters of bone, Storey has identified the partial remains of six individuals: an 18-month-old child, a 6 to 7-year-old, a 9 to 10-year-old, two late adolescent/young adult individuals (one perhaps 18–24 years of age and the other 20–35 years of age), and one individual 40–60 years of age. While these ages are preliminary, the age profile of the human remains bears an uncanny resemblance to an extended family grouping. The teeth from several different individuals in this group share the same “T”-shaped filing patterns and drilled holes for now missing inlays. Notably, an isolated tooth with the same filing pattern and an intact jade inlay was found sealed beneath the passageway floor in a context that resembled a dedicatory cache more than a termination ritual. While tooth modification is not necessarily an indicator of high rank (see Whittington and Reed, 1997), the dental modifications indicate that these were elite individuals, privileged to display the same “T”-shaped incisors as K’inich Ajaw, the sun god, framed by possible jadeite inlays on their canine teeth. The similar filing patterns among these individuals suggest a measure of longevity in the practice of dental modification among what may have been the chiefly line at Hershey.

Cut marks were identified on the skull of the 20 to 35-year-old late adolescent/young adult male individual. The frontal of the skull was nearly intact and was found directly on the surface of the elevated passageway (see [Fig. 4.5](#)) and the partial mandible of this individual, showing cut marks suggestive of defleshing, was also recovered from the North Plaza area, adjacent to the passageway. The partiality of the skull and the presence of defleshing marks suggest dismemberment and flying. Storey notes that this individual is represented by about 20% of the total skeletal elements, including vertebrae fragments and some of the



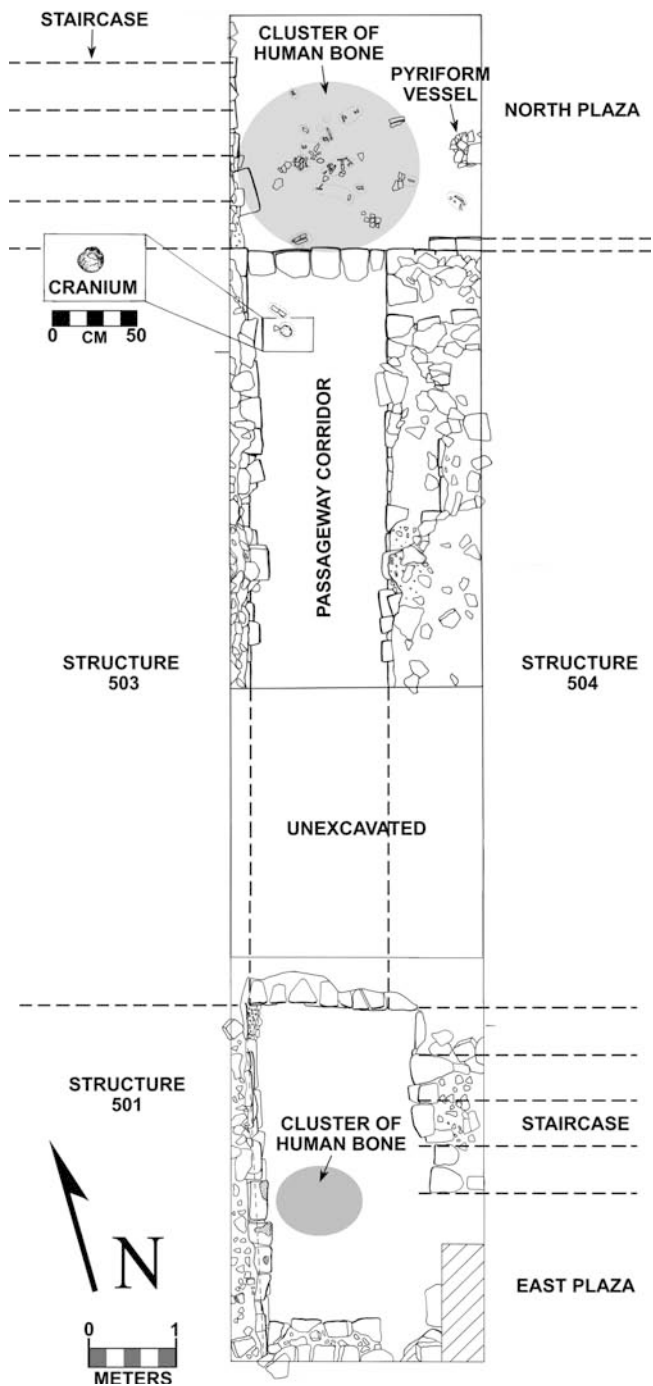


FIGURE 4.5. Plan view of the passageway at Hershey exposed in Operation 54 (illustration by E. Harrison-Buck and C. Cesario)

torso, but the skull is represented only by portions of the frontal, parietal, and partial mandible body. Like the other individuals in this context, the bones were extremely fragmentary, but well preserved.

Of the six individuals, most of the deposit probably belonged to the two oldest adults (mostly postcranials comprising long bone and torso fragments), while the other late adolescent/young adult (only a few cranium pieces and teeth) and all juveniles (teeth and a few pieces of long bone diaphysis) were very poorly represented. Only the two better-represented older adults had any paleopathological indicators on their bones, including healed slight infection, caries, and the younger adult (25–35 years of age) had healed porotic hyperostosis from childhood anemia. The remains appeared fairly healthy, although the paucity of skeletal elements probably underestimates the lesions that might have been present.

There is no evidence of sun bleaching or weathering, so the bones were not exposed long on the passageway surface, but appear to have been quickly mixed with a layer of artifacts and covered over by the surrounding structure tumble. There are several processes that may have contributed to the final “look” of the deposit, including human break up of the original skeletal elements, damage caused by structure fall, the general loss of preservation from the tropical climate, and of course, the further damage and loss from bioturbation of the deposit. All of these taphonomic signatures are likely to be implicated here, but separating these out poses a difficult task. Each must be considered in an interpretation of the deposit of human remains from Hershey.

There are several possible scenarios that explain the creation of the Hershey deposit, although each scenario suggests a violent, conquest-linked event. One possibility is that the human remains represent sacrificed individuals who were dismembered shortly after death, with some pieces removed as war trophies or souvenirs and others scattered about the passageway. With time and humid tropical conditions, the sacrificed individuals were reduced to the clusters of bone fragments that were recovered in the passageway excavation. If this was the case, one should find definite kinds of modification to the human remains, such as cut marks, percussion marks, marks of defleshing, and breaks characteristic of fresh bone (White, 1992; see also Tiesler in this volume). Cut marks and percussion marks from defleshed individuals are generally focused near the ends of long bones, logical places for taking a body apart, and multiple cut marks in an area are typically parallel (White, 1992). Also, the finding of animal gnawing would not be unexpected, especially if these were somewhat loosely buried by structure fall for some time. A second possibility is that the human remains represent secondary (already defleshed) skeletal remains exhumed from burials and tossed somewhat unceremoniously into the passageway and broken up more quickly by deliberate desecration and subsequent structure fall. Again, animal gnawing might be expected, and the fragmentary nature of individuals might be due to whatever skeletal elements were selected in the exhumation process. Chopmarks might be more random, in that tools were used to fragment already skeletonized bone. In this case, signs of dismemberment, defleshing, and fresh bone breakage would not be expected.



The Hershey deposit seems more compatible with the second scenario. Although there are few real joint ends preserved necessary for identifying cut marks and percussion marks at the end of bones, there are some possible chop marks. However, these appear to be randomly distributed on the bone shafts and more likely were caused by structure fall. There is a lot of animal gnawing, but this could just as well have occurred in the original context of a burial interment prior to exhumation. More importantly, the fragments are small and lack breakage patterns characteristic of fresh bone. There are defleshing marks on one of the six individuals and that is the only possible contradiction to the hypothesis of deliberate destruction of skeletonized individuals. However, limited skeletal remains of this individual (roughly 80% missing) makes it difficult to distinguish between the two alternatives: that among the human remains, this is the only example of a potential living, executed individual showing signs of trophy taking, or that the marks were done in the process of preparing a curated, honored individual for final burial in a tomb (that was later disturbed).

Overall, the broken, disarticulated nature of the entire assemblage of human bone lack characteristics indicative of human sacrifice. Despite the fragmentary state, the bones are in an excellent state of preservation. The evidence suggests that the remains of all six individuals could have been entombed, skeletonized, and later exhumed and scattered in the passageway during an act of conquest. Cranial fragments are generally lacking, but there are 28 loose premolars and molars out of the 42 teeth recovered. These teeth are much more likely to fall out of skeletal mandibles than fleshed ones. Although excavations at Hershey have not uncovered any desecrated tombs, there is a disturbed series of coarse-masonry “rooms” located high on the western flank of the main pyramid in Group A not far from the passageway. The notion that these clusters of human remains represent the aftermath of despoiled ancestral tombs is further supported by the fact that a number of finely made smashed ceramic vessels and seven marine shell ornaments (two shell tinklers, a tubular bead, a circular perforated bead, a perforated shell, and two shell pendants) were associated with the bone clusters – an indication that a number of the original elite burial accoutrements were scooped up when the bones were exhumed.

Recently, Barrett and Scherer (2005) reported an osteological analysis of a deposit of human bone found scattered on a platform near the base of a stepped pyramid at Colha, Belize that may be comparable to the Hershey deposit. Just west of the site’s main ceremonial plaza, the human remains were deposited on the terminal surface of the platform mixed with numerous artifacts and building collapse debris. Barrett and Scherer (2005) interpret the deposit as being the result of a mass accumulation of bodies with no evidence of true funerary treatment. Like the Hershey deposit, the bones were very disarticulated and fragmentary and represented only partial remains of multiple individuals. While the Hershey deposit only comprises six individuals, the bone fragments from the Colha deposit represent a total of 25 individuals. However, like Hershey, the bone fragments are limited in number (a total of 2,418 fragments), small in size (mostly less than 5 cm in length), and seem to lack breakage patterns characteristic of fresh bone.

Barret and Scherer (2005) do note some cut marks on cranial fragments, and also some on postcranials, although only one individual is mentioned. Barret and Scherer (2005) interpret the deposit, along with the better known skull pit (Massey, 1989), as evidence of final acts of violence against the Colha population as the site was razed in the Terminal Classic. The deposit at Colha may represent the remains of sacrificed individuals, but an alternative explanation is that they represent exhumed burials that were desecrated and scattered along the public ceremonial platform at Colha during an act of conquest.

Tomb desecration, as well as the sacrifice of entire royal families, is not unknown for the Maya area (Ambrosino, 1997; Mock, 1994, 1998a; Schele and Freidel, 1990). Supported by a wealth of ethnographic and ethnohistoric accounts that link conquest with defacement of ancestral tombs, scholars have argued that disentombing elite ancestors served as a symbolic act of conquest that sought to undermine the legitimization of a royal ancestral line (Ambrosino et al., 2001:119–120; Freidel, 1998:192–193; Mock, 1998a:118–119; Pagliaro et al., 2001:80–81). At the northern Yucatec site of Yaxuna, evidence of a ransacked tomb and extensive site destruction, attributed to a warring event between Yaxuna and Chichén Itzá in the Terminal Classic period, may be analogous to the termination deposit uncovered at the Hershey site. A re-entered tomb (Burial 25) was found within one of three desecrated rooms along the southwestern side of Structure 6F-68 in the North Acropolis at Yaxuna (Ambrosino, 1997, 1998; Ambrosino et al., 2001; Suhler et al., 2004). “The skull and parts of the upper torso were removed and the rest of the upper torso left in a jumble around the entry hole, grave offerings were removed and smashed, and a fire was lit in the entry hole” (Ambrosino et al., 2001:119–120). Intense fires were burned in both the crypt and the room and large holes were dug through each of the three-room floors. Human bone, whole vessels, fragments, and large amounts of elite items and other material (manos, metates, projectile points, jade implements, shell, and animal bone) were smashed and scattered throughout the rooms and along the front of the building, indicative of a desecratory termination deposit (Suhler et al., 2004:475).

Pagliaro and others (2001:77) define a desecratory termination ritual deposit as “the result of purposeful destruction and manipulation of material culture for the furtherment of goals aimed at destroying the supernatural power of a defeated community or faction. These rituals resulted in the formation of deposits that were used to ‘kill’ the animate supernatural power of an object, person, place, or portal to the otherworld.” These deposits are distinguished from midden or reverential deposits on the basis of several contextual criteria outlined by Pagliaro and colleagues (2001:79–80); these include: intensive burning, intentional structural damage, pot smashing and scattering, rapid deposition of material, dense concentrations of large sherds with sharp, angular breaks, and large quantities of “elite” artifacts.

Unlike most domestic trash deposits, desecratory termination ritual deposits can also include primary- or secondary-context human remains and may involve “purposeful disturbance and/or desecration of elite burials as well as the remains

of ritually sacrificed elite inhabitants of a Maya community” (Pagliaro et al., 2001:80). In contrast to most midden deposits, which are often located around the outside of structures, desecratory termination deposits are typically located within architectural boundaries (Pagliaro et al., 2001:79). Mock (1998b:6) notes that often dedicatory and desecratory termination deposits were purposefully placed at liminal interstices or key points of transition in architecture that show change, such as intersections (e.g., building and plaza centerlines) or openings (e.g., stairways and entrances). This was the case with the skull pit, another desecratory termination deposit from the Maya site of Colha where 20 adults and 10 children were decapitated and flayed and their skulls interred in a shallow pit adjacent to the stairway of an elite structure in the ceremonial center (Massey, 1989; Mock, 1994, 1998a; Steele et al., 1980). Archaeological evidence suggests that this event accompanied widespread destruction of the site, perhaps representing a violent conquest and sacrifice of elite members of the Colha community at the end of the Classic period (Mock, 1998a:115; Hester, 1985).

Alongside human remains, one of the most easily recognizable traits of a conquest-linked desecratory ritual deposit is the presence of smashed and widely scattered ceramics where sherds refit from different levels and widespread areas (Pagliaro et al., 2001:80). Ceramics from middens, on the other hand, are generally worn, more fragmentary, and cannot be refit and are deposited in a relatively localized area. Stanton and Gallareta Negrón (2001:232) note that the presence of smashed elite items, such as fancy serving vessels, associated with desecratory termination rituals may represent conquest-linked feasting events carried out by the victors of a warring event. Often, in these contexts local ceramics are found smashed and interspersed with foreign-made items. Suhler and colleagues (2004:474–475) refer to the latter as “signature materials” in that such artifacts are intrusive in the local assemblage and “occur in contexts that demonstrate the dominance of their makers while ritually overpowering an enemy place.” In the case of Yaxuna, Sotuta ceramics – signature wares of Chichén Itzá – were associated with the Terminal Classic site destruction and tomb desecration event, and were not found in any earlier deposits at the site (Suhler et al., 2004:456–458; Stanton and Gallareta Negrón, 2001). Whole ceramic vessels, some of which appear to have been grave offerings from Burial 25, were found smashed in front of the room interspersed with smashed Sotuta ceramics. Suhler et al. (2004:474–475) argue that the destructive context and evidence of “signature material” at Yaxuna demonstrate that the invaders stemmed from Chichén Itzá.

Like Structure 6F-68 at Yaxuna, the passageway at Hershey and the adjacent plaza floors were covered with a high density of smashed serving vessels and other elite items, co-mingled with disarticulated human bone. The context of the Hershey deposit is significant, located within a narrow passageway that represents one of the few restricted entrances into the main elite residential compound (refer to Fig. 4.3). The depositional pattern is similar to the Colha and Yaxuna desecratory deposits, both located in the elite ceremonial center of each site and associated with important architectural complexes (stairways, platforms, and rooms). Both the context and the contents of the widely scattered deposit at

Hershey are not suggestive of a midden or dedicatory deposit, but rather, reflect the criteria of a desecratory termination ritual (Pagliaro et al., 2001).

The Hershey assemblage consists primarily of finely made serving vessels including numerous ring-based dishes and several pedestal-based pyriform or bottle-shaped vessels, probably all locally produced. Other artifacts mixed within the terminal debris suggest foreign-made objects and may represent so-called signature material of the invading party. One example that does not appear to be a local artifact is a gouged-incised spindle whorl. This object displays a bird motif that is stylistically similar to numerous examples found at Chichén Itzá and the nearby Balankanche Cave (Andrews, 1970:Figs. 38a-i and 39a; Bolles, 1977:237-239). Additionally, one sherd associated with the terminal deposit at Hershey is clearly a northern import, possibly from Chichén Itzá. The sherd is decorated with a black trickle design that is distinctive of slatewares from the Sotuta and Cehpech ceramic complexes of northern Yucatán (Smith, 1971).

In addition to the smashed artifacts and well-preserved bones of elite individuals at Hershey, several other pieces of evidence support the notion of a termination event linked to conquest. Like the floors of the rooms in Structure 6F-68 at Yaxuna, large holes were found dug into areas of the plaza floors around the north and south entrances of the passageway, suggestive of intentional structural damage. Additionally, sizeable fragments of slate were recovered from the plaza areas leading to the passageway in association with the bone clusters. These slate fragments could be the remains of stelae, similar to stone monuments found at nearby sites to the north and south of the Sibun valley, particularly the Stann Creek Valley (Graham, 1994:289). Smashed or defaced stone monuments found at Maya sites, such as Tikal and Copán, often are cited as evidence of violence and martial activity during the Classic period (Friedel, 1998:192-193; Mock, 1998a:118). In the case of Copán, Schele (1991:5) observed, "the act of defacing as a part of ending the life of things like buildings and objects was so pervasive and fundamental to Maya thought that it functioned as a metaphor for the ending of the Copán dynasty." Finds of smashed slate fragments and intentional structure damage at Hershey lend further support to the notion that the Late Classic political regime at Hershey came to a violent end.

This terminal deposit in Group A at Hershey marks the final occupation and abandonment of the site core. The desecratory termination event may be linked to a political reorientation that is evident in the middle and lower reaches of the Sibun Valley, where increased coastal and northern interaction is evident at the end of the Classic period. Several sites in the middle and lower reaches of the valley contain circular shrine structures (Harrison-Buck, 2004; Harrison-Buck and McAnany, 2006). Round structures are frequently interpreted as a "Maya architectural form introduced at Chichén Itzá" (Kowalski et al., 1994:281); when found in other parts of the lowlands, circular shrines imply interaction with this northern center. Additionally, there is an influx of new ceramic types in the middle and lower reaches of the valley that contain northern attributes, such as basin and basal break bowl forms with thick bolstered rims and pyriform-shaped vessels (see Brainerd, 1958:47). These new ceramic forms depart from the Tepeu/Spanish Lookout

tradition, which dominates the Hershey site and the Belize Valley and Petén region further to the west, and point to an increased northern interaction in the Sibun Valley by Terminal Classic times (Harrison-Buck and McAnany, 2006).

#### 4.4. A Mortuary Deposit from Pakal Na: Empowered by a Northern Alliance

While the Hershey site appears to reflect a power shift and collapse of Petén-affiliated alliance structures at the beginning of the Terminal Classic, XARP excavations of more modest-sized sites in the middle and lower reaches of the Sibun Valley indicate that these settlements survived this period of decline and thrived during the Terminal Classic period (AD 780–900). This late florescence appears to mirror the rise and historical trajectory of sites in northern Yucatán (Andrews et al., 2003). Fueled by the growing hegemony of the north, the coastal Caribbean trade network assumed an increased importance (Andrews et al., 1988; Freidel and Sabloff, 1984; Guderjan and Garber, 1995; Masson and Mock, 2004; Sabloff and Rathje, 1975).

At the mid-valley site of Pakal Na, there is evidence of this late florescence and coastal interaction (see Fig. 4.2). Within Structure 130 (the largest at the site), an elaborate mortuary deposit was intruded into the eastern (front) central axis of this elongated platform (Harrison, 2002; Harrison and Acone, 2003; Storey, 2004 [Fig. 4.6]). Both the quality and nature of the grave offerings, including evidence of *postmortem* body processing and the extended period over which the mortuary ritual occurred, indicate that the central individual (Burial 1-A) was of high rank and possibly a prominent warrior. The style and content of grave goods again point to northern influence, likely stemming from Chichén Itzá.

The large burial pit at Pakal Na measures roughly 1.3 m wide, 3 m in length, and over 1 m in depth (refer to Fig. 4.6). The burial includes a total of five individuals: a primary interment (1-A) who was accompanied by the partial remains of four other individuals represented by discrete clusters of disarticulated human remains (1-B, 1-C, 1-D, and 1-E), which includes one individual represented by a carved human skull mask. Most appear to be male and older than 35 years of age (the sex of one individual is undetermined); the primary interment (1-A) was probably over 60 years of age at death and possibly a four-ka'tun lord.

The main interment (1-A) was laid out in an extended position with his legs crossed. The old male was a robust individual, showing pronounced muscle attachments on the shoulder girdle and a prominent *linea aspera* of the femur. Thus, an active lifestyle is indicated, which might be expected of a successful leader and warrior. The skull of Burial 1-A had been removed and replaced with an inverted bowl. The left arm and a portion of the torso and right forearm were also missing.

The disarticulated remains of Burial 1-B were located just east of Burial 1-A. 1-B included a skull with atlas vertebra and pieces of the left shoulder. Considerable wear on the teeth (one drilled for an inlay) and the closure of some sutures indicates that Burial 1-B was an older adult, probably the oldest of the

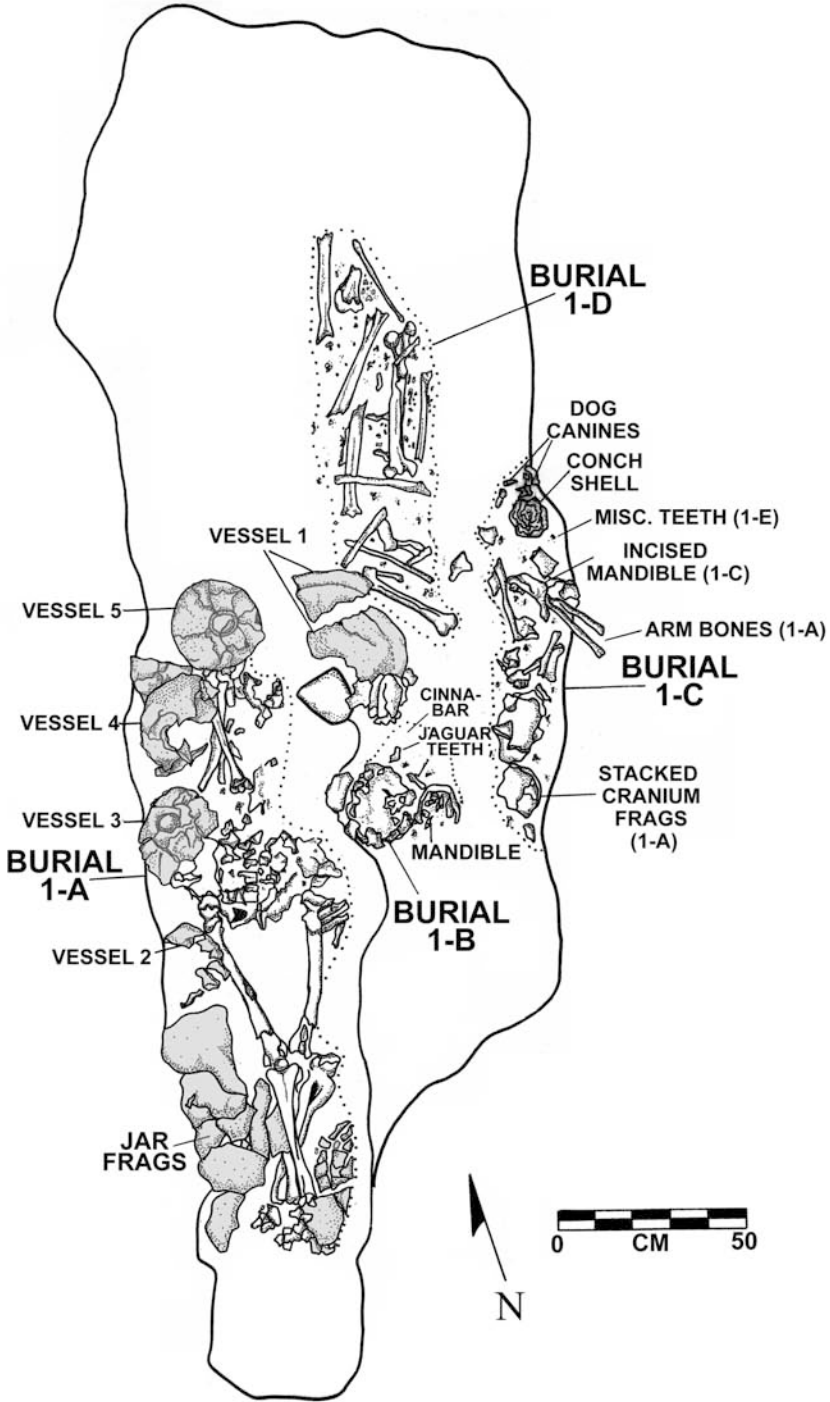


FIGURE 4.6. Plan view of the Pakal Na burial (illustration by K. Acone and S. Morandi)



secondary interments. The morphological features of the skull suggest a more gracile male, indicating that the skull did not belong to the 1-A interment. Drilled jaguar teeth and a 5–10 cm thick deposit of cinnabar found over a 20 cm diameter area were associated with the skull.

Burial 1-D, located just north of 1-B, may be part of the 1-B individual, but there is a clear separation between these two bone clusters (Fig 4.6). Thus, 1-D has been treated as a separate person. 1-D consists primarily of arm and leg bones with few other skeletal elements and they appear to have been scattered, rather than bundled.

The Burial 1-C deposit, like 1-D, did not appear bundled, but rather, was a collection of bones with associated grave goods that had been placed on an earthen shelf on the eastern side of the mortuary pit. During analysis, the skull of Burial 1-A was identified within the 1-C deposit. There was no skull modification, but two upper anterior teeth had been drilled for inlays. Additionally, the left arm, most of the right forearm, and parts of the cervical vertebrae of Burial 1-A was found in deposit 1-C. Grave goods found associated with this deposit include four perforated dog canines, the inner spiral of a Queen Conch marine shell, and the fragments of a carved skull mask (see Fig. 4.6).

Other human remains within the 1-C deposit included six teeth, mostly molars and premolars. These remains represent another separate individual and are designated 1-E. No cranial fragments could be linked to this individual, so it appears to be a deposit solely of teeth from a middle-aged to older individual; sex is undetermined.

Mortuary ritual surrounding the main interment (1-A) included the burning or smoking of the deceased, which likely included torching a wooden litter upon which the old male had been placed (see Medina and Sánchez in this volume, for discussion of human remains exposed to fire). Charcoal was scattered throughout the base of the pit, particularly under the lower legs of Burial 1-A where a dense, 15-cm thick deposit of charcoal had accumulated on top of a bed of large sherds from a red-neck, striated jar (the sherds also were blackened and coated with charcoal residue). The bones of the focal individual bear evidence of smudging and scorching from smoke, although the bone is well preserved and is not calcined as it would have been if cremated. A charcoal sample (AA55938) collected from the burned wood beneath the legs of the primary interment yielded a 2-sigma calibrated radiocarbon date range of AD 687–959. Another sample (AA55936) with a calibrated range of AD 776–979 was associated with a later construction episode that capped the burial pit. Examined together with the ceramic assemblage, the Pakal Na burial appears to date to the Late-to-Terminal Classic transition.

Further evidence of posthumous manipulation of the primary interment is provided by traces of red and yellow ochre paint on the bones, some in places like the promontory of the sacrum that could only be accessed if bones were exposed and physically removed. Despite removal and painting of the bones, mortuary specialists preserved the articulated position of the skeleton (see Fig. 4.6).

Notably, all individuals (including that represented by the skull mask) show significant dental calculus deposits. This not only indicates poor dental hygiene practices among these populations, but also signals a highly acidic diet that can result from ingestion of large amounts of protein (Hillson, 1996). This dietary indicator plus the robust health and advanced age of the primary interment suggest that these interments were individuals of high status, at least as adults. Additionally, teeth from 1-A and 1-B had been modified through filing or inlays, perhaps originally of jade. The main interment and the other individuals had clear evidence of healed infections. Again, it is probably a tribute to the generally good lifestyle and prestige accorded to these individuals that they were able to survive systemic infection.

The complex mortuary ritual probably included the following events. First, Burial 1-A was placed, likely on a perishable litter, in an extended position on his back with feet crossed and hands placed on the pelvis. Ceramic sherds and some stone were used to line the area where the main interment was placed. The body appears to have been left to skeletonize prior to burial. A thick bed of charcoal underneath the legs of the main interment indicates an episode of intense burning and smudging on the bone attests to the smoking of the body, a process that would have expedited the defleshing of the body. At some point, the skeletal elements were individually removed, painted, and the bones then repositioned and the articulation of the skeleton preserved. At this stage, the left arm, the cranium, and parts of the torso and right forearm were moved and placed on the ledge in deposit 1-C. The left humerus within 1-C matched the undisturbed right humerus of 1-A. A robust cranium, also likely belonging to 1-A, was found stacked in the southern end of cluster 1-C and may have been partially bundled as a stack of vault pieces, although other elements of 1-A (arm and torso bones) appear to have been scattered in this area (see Fig. 4.6). The evidence indicates that the skull of 1-A was purposefully removed from the body and broken, perhaps to weaken its power before final interment. At this point, or perhaps earlier, additional human remains (1-B, 1-D, and 1-E) were added to the base of the burial pit, along with grave offerings, including the skull mask and the four ceramic vessels (Vessels 2–5) placed along the centerline of the main interment (refer to Fig. 4.6). As the large burial pit was being in-filled, a number of finely made ceramics were smashed and scattered throughout the fill, including large fragments of Vessel 1 which were found between 20 and 50 cm above the human remains.

All individuals in the Pakal Na burial appear to have been in a skeletonized state (i.e., defleshed) when they were interred and the burial pit backfilled. Apparently, the disarticulated individuals (1-B, 1-D, and 1-E) had been curated and likely functioned as burial furnishings for the primary interment. These could represent sacrificial victims or war trophies of the main individual but are just as likely to represent a group of venerated ancestors who may have served to ritually charge the burial ground. The curated remains of Burial 1-B with offerings of jaguar teeth and cinnabar especially favor this interpretation. Furthermore, the joints of at least seven leg and arm bones from the various skeletal deposits are well preserved and do not show any signs of cut marks suggestive of dismemberment and mutilation.

The skull mask, on the other hand, is covered with cut marks and was probably the victim of *perimortem* violence.

The carved human skull mask, found in bone cluster 1-C, is the most notable grave offering within the Pakal Na burial (Figs. 4.6 and 4.7). The mask is similar, though far more elaborate, to skull masks found with Classic period elite burials at the site of Copán in Honduras (Storey, 2005) and those at the Terminal Classic site of Xochicalco in the central Mexican highlands (Hirth, 1989). Trophy masks

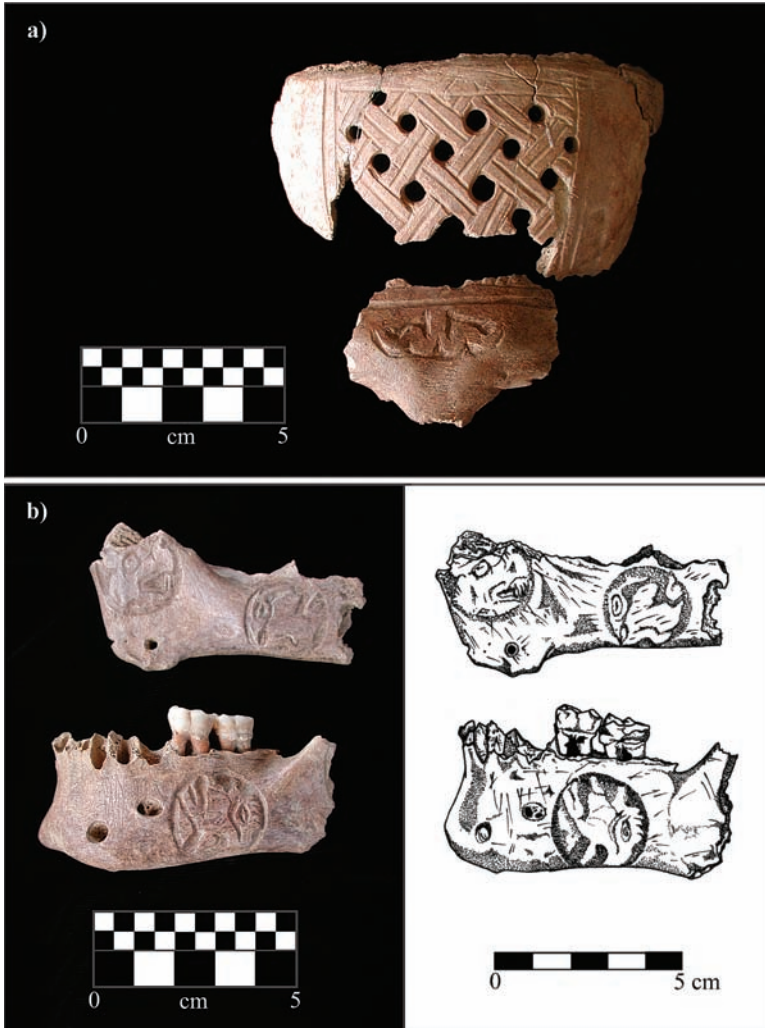


FIGURE 4.7. Views of the Pakal Na skull mask: (a) Carved mat motif on the top of skull (top) and carved symbol on the glabella (bottom). (b) Cartouches on the mandible (photographs by P.A. McAnany, illustration by K. Acone)

were worn as pectorals by elite warriors and likely were fashioned from captives taken in war. The only age indicator on the Pakal Na specimen is moderate tooth wear, which probably indicates a young to middle-aged adult at the time of death. The marks of skinning are very clear, indicating that the head of the decapitated captive was flayed and the skull carved shortly after death. Along the jaw line, there are vertical cut marks where the mandible was defleshed (see Fig. 4.7b). Additionally, the bone appears to have been “smoked”; areas of scorching are concentrated on the interior surface of the skull, with only limited scorching on the exterior surface. The skull mask could have been ceremonially burned as part of the mortuary ritual or perhaps the head was burned to reduce the presence of soft tissue. Once skeletonized, the back half of the skull was removed and the edges polished. Then, the top of the skull was carved with a mat motif and drilled holes placed at the interstices of the woven design (Fig. 4.7a). Triangular designs line the sides of the square-shaped mat motif. Mock (1997:177, Fig. 12) describes a similar design as fire elements that are paired with a mat motif on Terminal Classic Palmar Orange polychrome pottery from Northern River Lagoon (a coastal site in northern Belize) and notes the link between the mat design and rulership (Mock, 1997:177; see also Tedlock, 1985:345). The mat design is complemented by another iconographic element, the smoke affix of the Mayan *k'ahk'* glyph carved on the glabella and centered between the eye sockets (Fig. 4.7a). This element also resembles the serpent tongues that form part of the warrior-on-serpent images seen in both the Lower and Upper Temple of the Jaguars (Ringle, 1998:Fig. 16d,e; see also Tozzer, 1957) at the northern site of Chichén Itzá. There is some evidence of incising on the infraorbital area as well, so all of face was probably decorated, but only small fragments of this portion of the skull were preserved.

Two cartouches containing animal imagery – canines or felines paired with an unidentified avian species – were carved on each side of the mandible of the Pakal Na skull mask (Fig. 4.7b). Additionally, the partial remains of other cartouches that appear to contain the same imagery are visible on the sides of the cranial portion of the skull mask, along the edge of the mat motif. This avian and canine or feline imagery is likely analogous to the paired images of jaguars and eagles found in Late–Terminal Classic iconography at Chichén Itzá, such as the images on the *tzompantli* or Temple of the Skulls and the adjacent Platform of the Eagles where both animals are seen devouring sacrificial human hearts (see Tozzer, 1957:Fig. 86). Thought to relate to military sodalities at Chichén Itzá, similar paired zoomorphic imagery has been reported from Terminal Classic and Early Postclassic sites farther a field, including Xochicalco (Ringle et al., 1998:Fig. 11d), Cacaxtla (Nagao, 1989:Fig. 4), and Tula (Healan, 1989: Fig. 3.8) in the Mexican highlands.

The mandible of the Pakal Na skull mask was drilled in several places along the inferior margin (Fig. 4.7b). Feathers or other decorative elements could have been attached to the mask, or the mandible could have been attached to the skull and worn around the neck of the warrior, presumably by the individual who had claimed the life of the captive. According to Hirth (1989:76), trophy heads

validated a warrior's capture of a sacrificial victim and accorded him elevated status through successful participation in warfare. With evidence of foreign connections and martial prowess, it is no surprise that the focal burial – an older male – received elaborate mortuary treatment upon his death. During the Late Classic period, skull masks as burial offerings and extended mortuary ritual involving elaborate body processing, such as the smoking and painting of bones, appear limited to high-ranking individuals and members of royal families (Storey, 2005). Such royal treatment has been documented for the ruling elite at a number of large Classic Maya centers, including Copán (Storey, 2005), Piedras Negras (Fitzsimmons, 1998), and Caracol (Chase and Chase, 1996). The Pakal Na mortuary facility, located at a modest-sized Maya site, provides information on changes in socio-political organization at the end of the Classic period, when successful warriors even in peripheral settlements might be accorded high status. Conceivably, the social hierarchy in the Sibun Valley was impacted by shifting regional power structures at the end of the Classic period, when Petén-affiliated alliances collapsed and new political and economic relationships with northern polities, like Chichén Itzá, may have been formed.

Two of the five complete vessels associated with the elaborate burial at Pakal Na may provide further evidence of northern influence in this part of the valley during the Late–Terminal Classic transition. Vessels 3 and 4, positioned along the centerline of the primary interment (see Fig. 4.6), are pyriform-shaped vessels with prominent pedestal bases. Both of these vessels contain a series of large dimple impressions and one features X-incisions around the circumference of the vessel. The two vessels, which show signs of scorching, are unusual in form and surface decoration. Importantly, LeCount (1996:157) notes that cylinder vases are the most common drinking cup in the central Petén and barrel-shaped vases are popular in the Belize Valley, but pyriforms are rare in both areas. A variant of this form is more common in northern Yucatán during the Late and Terminal Classic periods (see Branierd, 1958 and Smith, 1971). Although probably locally produced, the presence of pyriform-shaped vessels in the Sibun Valley suggests the development of a new interaction sphere at the end of the Late Classic period that departs from the Tepeu/Spanish Lookout tradition and may be further evidence of growing ties with the north. The two vessels may have served as drinking cups for cacao – an important ceremonial beverage and a crop grown locally in the Sibun Valley. They compare favorably with the pyriform drinking cup depicted on an unprovenienced vessel (in Dumbarton Oaks Collection in Washington D.C.) that features cacao pods and a version of the maize deity (Coe and Coe, 1996:45; Martin, 2006).

## 4.5. Discussion

Both contexts – the human remains scattered in the passageway of the Hershey site and the deep burial pit of Pakal Na – contain pyriform vessels. At Pakal Na, the vessels were complete when interred and likely contained liquid (perhaps the

cacao drink) while those found at Hershey were broken and co-mingled with disarticulated human remains. As this study illustrates, differential contexts containing the same type of artifacts can indicate starkly different circumstances and relationships (see also Stanton and Gallareta Negrón, 2001). Although the pyriform vessels appear to be locally produced, the introduction of new pottery styles points to new influences in ceramic production stemming from northern Yucatán, and signals a departure from a Petén-affiliated (Tepeu) ceramic tradition in the Sibun Valley during the Late–Terminal Classic transition. The presence of a northern-style spindle whorl and a sherd with trickle ware decoration are likely Yucatec imports and offer further evidence of a northern interaction at Hershey. Stanton and Gallareta Negrón (2001) suggest that contexts of desecratory termination ritual in which finely crafted serving vessels and elite imported goods are found may be considered “a particular class of ritual feasting that occurred after conquest events and violent internal factional conflicts” (Stanton and Gallareta Negrón, 2001:230; see also Bey, 2001). In contradistinction, when similar elite goods are found in caches, burials, or “non-destructive” feasting deposits, they may suggest gift-giving and alliance with an outside power (Stanton and Gallareta Negrón, 2001:230).

Employing this model, we propose that the pyriform drinking cups and the skull mask incorporating northern-style militaristic iconography found associated with an important deceased warrior and ruler of Pakal Na may indicate a northern allied relationship or even that he was a Northerner himself. Isotopic and strontium analyses are in progress and will surely shed more light on the origins of this formidable warrior and the accompanying individuals (see Price et al. in this volume). The inclusion of a skull mask suggestive of captive-taking points to the changes in the socio-political organization, emphasizing increased conflict and warfare during the Late–Terminal Classic transition, and a shift in political and economic alliances in this part of the Sibun Valley. A contrastive but coeval deposit was recovered from the Hershey site. Finely made serving vessels and other objects (including some “signature material” pointing to northern influence) found smashed and scattered in a passageway leading to the primary elite residence is suggestive of a conquest-linked event involving outsiders, perhaps allies of the northern Yucatec capital of Chichén Itzá. These items could have been used – even specially manufactured – for a conquest feast at the Hershey Site sponsored by the perpetrators. Desecrated feasting debris co-mingled with intentional structural damage and disarticulated human remains serve as another materialization of the profound socio-political changes taking place during the Late–Terminal Classic transition, but suggest a different outcome in the upper part of the Sibun Valley.

As Pagliaro and others (2001:77) observe, “although the destruction and material patterning associated with . . . rituals linked to warfare and dominance may superficially resemble reverential termination ritual deposits, desecratory termination deposits present an archaeological signature that is contextually distinct from these acts of veneration.” Careful examination of the context, composition, contents, as well as condition of associated artifacts and human bone can aid in



the identification of these different classes of ritual activity. Elsewhere, Stanton and Gallareta Negrón (2001:232) argue that desecratory termination deposits represent the remains of a ritual practice “designed to ‘kill’ places or objects associated with defeated enemies.” Their conjecture is given further support by the finds from the Hershey site, where human remains of six disarticulated individuals associated with a high density of smashed elite goods were found scattered in a passageway leading to the elite residence. The fragments of bone and teeth (some filed and others drilled for inlays that were extracted before deposition) are well preserved; dental modifications displaying the T-shaped incisors of K’inch Ajaw and possible jadeite inlays suggest that these individuals were likely elite residents of the Hershey site. Several possible explanations could account for this deposit, including ritual human sacrifice of the head family of the Hershey site. Another likely explanation – and one that is pursued in this study – involves a victorious tomb desecration event accompanied by feasting and destruction of the site core.

The bleak historical trajectory of the Hershey site was not unique for the Maya area. Other examples of termination ritual, tomb desecration, and elite sacrifice linked with conquest events that correspond with site abandonment in the Terminal Classic period have been identified at numerous sites, such as Yaxuna, Colha, Copán, and Tikal, to name only a few (Fash et al., 2004; Mock, 1994, 1998a; Pagliaro et al., 2001; Suhler et al., 2004). The timing of the terminal deposit in the passageway at Hershey corresponds to the collapse of the site center much like, for instance, the Terminal Classic skull pit and large deposit of fragmentary human bone correspond with a site destruction event marking the end of the Classic period occupation at Colha (Barrett and Scherer, 2005; Hester, 1985; Mock, 1994, 1998a).

Within a larger regional context, the fate of the Sibun Valley residents appears to be a microcosm of larger forces at work in late Maya Classic society, a period characterized by increased warfare and large-scale political collapse, especially in the Petén region. Hieroglyphic texts compiled by Martin and Grube (2000) reveal the precarious position of Naranjo – a gateway site located in Petén, Guatemala immediately west of the Belizean border that sought to control the rich resources of the Caribbean valleys. Ten of 18 (56%) known hieroglyphic texts that feature Naranjo in reference to regional interaction contain statements of martial conflict (Martin and Grube, 2000:21). At Hershey, evidence of Late Classic connections with Naranjo and the violent termination event in the site core around the turn of the ninth century AD suggests that Hershey may have experienced some of the same martial conflict that ultimately resulted in the collapse of the Petén-affiliated center of Naranjo. The lack of Early Postclassic occupation at Hershey, coupled with the undisturbed nature of the passageway deposits, has resulted in an unusually crisp signature of terminal activities at this Petén-affiliated Classic-period center. Based on the manner in which human remains were incorporated into the termination deposit in the passageway, some residents of the Hershey site core either experienced a violent end or their ancestors were subjected to tomb desecration. In either case,

the message of conquest is clearly expressed, indicating the termination of the ruling lineage at Hershey.

Significantly, the radiocarbon assays for the Hershey site passageway deposit and the Pakal Na burial are statistically identical. Unlike Hershey, the mid-valley site continued to flourish into the Terminal Classic, as another episode of construction took place around the mid to late ninth century AD that capped the Pakal Na burial. Furthermore, evidence of shifting power structures and new political and economic alliances stemming from the north are expressed in the iconography of the Pakal Na skull mask, militaristic imagery found at Chichén Itzá that became widely shared throughout broad areas of Mesoamerica. Evidence of martial sodalities and acts of conquest involving a great many participants can be gleaned from the Late-to-Terminal Classic iconography of Chichén Itzá (Chase and Chase, 2004:20–21; Krochrock, 1988; Wren and Schmidt, 1991; see also Miller in this volume). Signs of captive-taking, higher acclaimed status, and possibly the introduction of martial sodalities at modest-sized, peripheral settlements like Pakal Na accompany the introduction of Yucatec-style circular architecture and ceramics with northern attributes at sites throughout the middle and lower reaches of the Sibun Valley. These developments occur precisely when the Hershey core and other Petén-affiliated centers collapse.

## 4.6. Conclusions

Together, osteological and contextual data suggest that political influence over the valley was actively contested at the end of the Classic period when the influence of the Petén – attested in ceramics and architecture – appears to have been challenged by the growing power of the northern Yucatec region, likely Chichén Itzá. The introduction of northern-style circular shrines, changes in the treatment of human remains and burial offerings, along with violent termination events index the social and political transformation and re-orientation of the Sibun valley inhabitants.

The two contrastive deposits from the Sibun Valley illustrate how modification of human remains through exhumation, burning, smoking, cutting, carving, and painting can be profoundly informative of larger political and social circumstances. As a strategic production area for cacao, the Sibun Valley seemingly became enmeshed in the larger webs of competing political spheres during a period of profound political and economic transformation. As Suhler and others (2004:483) note elsewhere, “clearly there was a price to be paid for living in a community, whether independent capital or vassal to outsiders, that was strategic in the commercial and political interests of regional powers.” The Sibun Valley study reveals the variability in elite response to outside influences and the complex factional relationships that existed in the Maya Lowlands during the Late–Terminal Classic transition. The contextual and material evidence from Hershey and Pakal Na, when framed within a regional picture that encompasses

hieroglyphic and iconographic evidence from both Naranjo and Chichén Itzá, provides support for a model of Lowland Maya geo-politics in which powerful rulers forged interpolity alliances, sponsored acts of martial aggression against enemy polities, and generally sought to control territories from which highly desired luxury goods – such as cacao – might be procured. In this way, Sibun cacao farmers became entangled in a larger web of ambition and – through their variable responses – found themselves either empowered or disempowered at the end of the Classic period.

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