

Squaring off: Late Middle Preclassic architectural innovation at Cuello, Belize

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FIGURE 1. The eastern portion of Str. 315e from the northeast, showing the trimmed-back final floor and sides (note the base of the east and north plaster facing at ground level). At upper left the Late Preclassic floors and massive rubble fill of Platform 34 overlies the courtyard floor 6146 and its northern extension 6142. The unpaved area in the foreground is sheet midden of c. 400 BC.



FIGURE 3. Successive courtyard floors 8057 (foreground), 6146 (yellowish, left rear) and 6142 (to right, northern portion removed) documenting enlargement of the enclosed area 600–400 BC.



FIGURE 2. The southeast corner of Str. 315d, the first rectangular-plan building at Cuello, showing the boulder framing and plaster covering of the final-period front platform and the terrace behind. Floor 6146 is in the foreground, while floor 6142 behind has been removed.

Excavations at the early Maya village site of Cuello, Belize, intermitted 1993–2000, were continued in 2002. One objective was to complete investigation of the north-side struc-

tures of the Middle Preclassic courtyard group which formed the focus of the Cuello community from before 900 to c. 400 BC (Hammond 1991: figures 3.4–3.9), the Late Preclassic structures above them having been excavated in the previous season (Hammond *et al.* 2000). A second aim was to uncover the western section of the sweathouse or *pib na*, dating to c. 900 BC and thus antedating other known Preclassic Maya sweathouses by half a millennium (Hammond & Bauer 2001). A

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new 5x5-m trench, south and west of the catercornered areas investigated in 2000 and thus linking them, was taken swiftly down through the successive plaster floors of the Late Preclassic Platform 34 and the massive rubble courtyard infill beneath them (FIGURE 1); from the courtyard floor down, excavation was as a single 11x5-m trench.

At its north end was the eastern portion of Structure 315: the remainder had been excavated in 1976 and 1990, and we expected its final phases (Str.315d-e) to be subrectangular and some 10 m long, with the axial front step and doorway bisected by the 40E section (Hammond 1991: figures 5.12, 5.14–16). We were wrong: Str. 315 extended only 2 m east, making it almost square in plan, with the projecting 'step' being a low platform attached to the southeast corner (FIGURE 2), and the 'doorway' an inset niche forming a step up on the platform surface. We confirmed that the rectangular plan was initiated with Str. 315d, probably in the early 5th century BC, which had been severely truncated before receiving a new fill and final floor; these were in turn slighted when the courtyard's flanking structures were ceremoniously destroyed and buried below Platform 34 c. 400 BC.

Str. 315a–c had an apsidal plan, like Str. 320a–f below and slightly south on the smaller courtyard which existed before 600 BC: the innovations of a square-cornered plan and a higher basal platform, two of the defining traits of later Maya ceremonial architecture, seem to have occurred around the middle of the millennium. Str. 315d–e was partnered by Str. 314 on the western side of the courtyard and Str. 334 on the east (Hammond *et al.* 2000: figure 2), the latter replacing the apsidal-ended Str. 339 but set further back.

The progressive enlargement of the Middle Preclassic courtyard between 600 and 400 BC was documented by the horizontal stratigraphy of its floors (FIGURE 3). The white floor 8057 (left foreground) ended at the southern margin of Str. 320; the yellow floor 6146 (left rear) was carefully lapped over it, the older floor being shaved down to achieve a level surface, and abutted the front of Str. 315. When the latter was squared off, a further floor extension (6142) was laid down (far right in FIGURE 3: the northern portion has already been excavated), wrapping round 6146 to abut the eastern side of Str. 315d, and extending eastwards over the demolished Str. 339 to rise up the front terrace of Str. 334.

Laying of this last floor had sealed a grave cut into the dark earth and sheet midden that lay outside the floored courtyard area. The grave cist for Burial 186 was 1.16 m long, a dimension appropriate for a subadult, as with Burial 181 found in 2000 (Hammond *et al.* 2000: figure 3); the skeleton within was, however, that of a robust adult female in her 20s, who had been c. 1.70 m tall. The body had been crammed

into the too-small cut face down, the head bent back and the right leg pressed against the end of the grave with the foot protruding up over the edge. There were no evident grave-goods, and Burial 186 joins Burials 21 and 125 (Robin 1989: 197–8, 381; Saul & Saul 1997: 33) as 'sprawled' interments associated with architectural expansion, and arguably dumped as offerings, perhaps sacrifices.

The dark earth east of Str. 315 yielded a substantial sherd deposit (6186), notable for their large size and the variety of complex vessel forms present. A human frontal bone, cut from the skull and perforated for attachment or suspension, suggests that non-domestic activity was involved, perhaps as Landa (Tozzer 1941: 131) attests for the 16th-century Yucatan Maya, connected with ancestor veneration. Entire shells of the fragile edible snail *Pomacea flagellata* attest both to the undisturbed nature of 6186, and in their restricted range of size (mean 39.3 mm, SD .014; n=73) to Maya harvesting of *Pomacea* at a perceived size:flavour optimum (*cf.* Hammond 1991: figure 4.2 for later and even more selective cropping).

On the eastern side of the courtyard, the 'Structure 341' noted close to the limit of the 2000 trench proved to be the edge of a substantial levelling and flooring of an early phase of courtyard development. This, and the earlier firepits F.301–403 had, unfortunately, obliterated much of the western portion of the sweathouse, although the terminus of the sunken dry-walled central channel survived, with traces of the west wall just beyond. There was no space for an entry there (*contra* Hammond & Bauer 2001: figure 3), and the sweathouse seems to have formed part of a loose cluster of low platforms supporting perishable superstructures, preceding the formal layout of buildings around a patio which marked the emergence of a focus to the Cuello community early in the Bladen phase (900–650 BC).

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