

## Chapter 2

# Sedimenting Social Identity: The Practice of Pre-Columbian Maya Body Partibility

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**Abstract** While researchers of the pre-Columbian Maya have recognized that considerable variability characterizes treatment of dead bodies, few have scrutinized the practice of body partibility. The materiality of this practice indicates the ways in which social identities become transposed and then sedimented over generations. As one particularly cogent example, I examine a royal tomb from Dos Hombres, a ceremonial center located in northwestern Belize. The burial is also compared to other royal tombs in the region. While cultural continuities are identifiable, the Dos Hombres tomb is unique given its combination of attributes, namely the residential context into which it was entombed, its associated architecture, the approximately 20,000 obsidian flakes placed atop it, and the two decedents contained within—one of whom exhibited intentional body partibility. To make sense of this complicated burial, I take my cue from scholars who attend to mortuary processes that are materially subtle and often extended. Doing so facilitates distinction between myriad meanings encoded in corporeal manipulations.

## 2.1 Introduction

Engaging with corpses—sometimes many years or decades after individuals' demises—is one way by which the living remember, reenvision, revere, or revile the dead. Processing bodies is bound intimately to (re)formation of identities, and bioarchaeologists readily recover data about the former in order to illumine the latter. In so doing, they can narrate key aspects of an individual's *death history*. In contrast to life histories, death histories reveal the reasons for, and means by which a community's living members sustained and/or transformed social identities via handling of their biologically dead (Geller 2012b). Cessation of life, in many cultures, does not necessitate social death.

What, then, does postmortem body partibility tell us about a decedent's death history? To familiarize the reader, here I briefly recap key points about partibility,

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which I have discussed in greater detail elsewhere (2012b). Clearly, body partibility indicates desecration in certain cases, such as violent decapitation and dismemberment. My concern, however, is with those partible practices that sedimented decedents' social identities over generations, and in so doing permitted the living to engage with and venerate their ancestors. In previous discussions, I have treated the marks and meanings of body partibility in burials of Maya commoners, demonstrating a link between certain types of fragmentation and ancestral identities (Geller 2004, 2011, 2012a, b). As a complement to this work, I consider here a stratigraphically complex tomb from Dos Hombres constructed some 1,500 years ago. Taken together, it is possible to determine the extent to which partible practices' religious, existential, and cosmological dimensions crosscut social levels.

Detection of intentional body partibility necessitates a methodology that attends to subtle and multi-staged processes. Unfortunately, the Maya Lowlands' tropical environs often make for very inconsistent and inadequate preservation of human remains. Explaining partibility may seem like an exercise in equifinality. How is a researcher to discern desecration from veneration from natural degeneration? A forensic approach, which some label *l'anthropologie de terrain* or archaeothanatology (Duday 1997, 2006, 2009) and others osteotaphonomy (Cucina and Tiesler 2007; Tiesler 2004), proves effective for circumventing impediments to data collection. Careful in situ documentation of taphonomic alterations, whether by natural processes or human intervention, is stressed.

Those who study the ancient Maya are also blessed with assorted resources that deepen forensic identification. As a complement to skeletal and osteotaphonomic analyses, I find epigraphic translation, iconography, and analogies gleaned from salient ethnohistoric documents and contemporary ethnography about the Maya invaluable. Additionally, seeing that the Maya interred multiple decedents within buildings they continued to occupy and renovate, consideration of architectural context and stratigraphic associations between burials is crucial. Bioarchaeologists' investigation of partibility, then, relies on contextualization of human remains in physical space, historical period, and cultural setting, as well as methodological regard for minutiae.

## 2.2 Body Partibility: Meaning and Methods

Scholars' investigations of groups ranging wide in time and space—from modern Melanesia (Busby 1997; Strathern 1988) to Medieval Europe (Geary 1986) to Mesolithic Scandinavia (Fowler 2002, 2004) to Neolithic peoples in Southeast Europe (Chapman 2000; Chapman and Gaydarska 2007)—have elucidated the active social lives that body parts led within specific historical and cultural contexts. This growing corpus has provided a framework for exploring partibility as practiced by the pre-Columbian Maya.

Partibility involves the intentional fragmentation of bodies and subsequent curation of distinct parts. This definition does not include random scatters of bone or

the isolated skeletal element unintentionally disturbed during ancient construction episodes. Some partible practices indelibly marked the bodies of the living. Maya mourners, for example, may have amputated select fingers antemortem as an expression of grief following a child's death (Geller 2011).<sup>1</sup> In contrast, decapitation strongly suggests perimortem partibility, while postmortem practices fragmented decomposing or skeletonized bodies. Desecration and dehumanization were surely the motivation behind certain partible acts (Duncan 2005; Mock 1998). Other scholars have determined that posthumous partibility reflects sociopolitical strategizing amongst members of royal lineages (e.g., Harrison-Buck et al. 2007; Weiss-Krejci 2004, 2006, 2011). Yet, human remains are not just objects with tactical value, a conception undergirded by Cartesian dichotomizations like life/death and subject/object. Indeed, belief in a cyclical system of life-death-regeneration has long been a cornerstone of Maya epistemology (Carlsen and Prechtel 1991). For cultures that revere ancestors, as the Maya did, social life often continued despite biological death and anatomical divisibility.

Identification of partibility is difficult given the notoriously poor preservation of human remains from the Maya Lowlands. With investigative hurdles in mind, Frank Saul and Julie Mather Saul have established standards based on their years of fieldwork. They are especially well versed in the impact that Belize's geology and ecology have on human remains (e.g., Saul and Saul 1991, 1997; Saul et al. 2005). Saul and Saul were responsible for analyzing the Three Rivers region skeletal sample, which is central in this chapter.<sup>2</sup> The analysts regard forensic methods and attention to taphonomic processes as fundamental (Saul and Saul 2002). They also subject human remains to careful excavation, in situ examination, measured recording of location and orientation of bones in relation to each other, and curation.

Saul and Saul's standardized treatment of burials has been a key contribution to Maya studies. From the skeletal data collected, they have reconstructed individuals' life histories, or osteobiographies (Saul 1972; Saul and Saul 1989). Yet, their approach also has its limitations. Buikstra and Scott have commented that osteobiography is essentially a forensic methodology that uses data to answer population-based queries about functional adaptations and demography (2009, p. 36; see also Buikstra 2006, pp. 350–351). Moreover, Saul and Saul may invoke information about physical context, but their attention is on the close at hand. The larger spatial context and detailed stratigraphic location of the human remains and

<sup>1</sup> Chase and Chase (1998, p. 319, 2011, p. 84) have unearthed finger bowls at Caracol, which they suggest are offerings to ancestors. Yet, they do not go as far to argue that the ritual events surrounding amputation transformed children into ancestors. For such a suggestion see Geller (2009).

<sup>2</sup> The Three Rivers region is an arbitrarily defined study area in northwestern Belize and northeastern Guatemala (Adams 1995). From 1992 to 2002, excavators unearthed 130 individuals in association with rural house ruins, minor centers, and major centers in the region's Belizean sector (Geller 2004). This work was conducted under the aegis of three different projects—La Milpa Archaeological Project (LaMAP) codirected by Norman Hammond and Gair Tourtellot, Programme for Belize Archaeological Project (PfbAP) directed by Fred Valdez, and Chan Chich Archaeological Project (CCAP) directed by Brett Houk. All three projects followed excavation guidelines established by Saul and Saul.

grave, which I explain below, are not forthcoming. Accordingly, it is possible to detect partible practices in individual cases, but cultural significance is then challenging to address.

Additionally, while their identification of perimortem trauma provides an exception, Saul and Saul's focus on life histories leaves death histories unexamined (cf. Robb 2002).<sup>3</sup> Understating decedents' social vitality seems a sizeable interpretative gap when the people under study engaged ancestors on a daily basis. In the case of the Maya, death histories have much to convey about individuals and the culture at large. To this end, the osteotaphonomic approach used by Vera Tiesler (2004, 2005, 2007; Tiesler et al. 2010) has proved constructive. Similar to Saul and Saul, Tiesler pays heed to the specific taphonomic forces affecting Maya burials. Her investigation of mortuary praxis, however, builds on work by Duday (1997, 2006, 2009; Duday and Guillon 2006). Archaeothanatology,<sup>4</sup> according to Duday, documents burials' taphonomic changes and perishable attributes in order to draw inferences about funeral rites and eschatological beliefs.

Osteotaphonomy and archaeothanatology are perspectives that concentrate on mortuary processing; hence, they are of great utility when considering posthumous partibility. But, it is important to reiterate that bioarchaeology, the larger umbrella under which these approaches are situated, needs to recount life and death histories. By virtue of Maya burials' proximity to buildings—decedents were generally interred beneath structures that the living continued to use and renovate—information about an individual's identity, from birth to beyond one's final breath, is best served by also attending to physical context. Stratigraphic assessment offers a life history of architecture (e.g., Bailey 1990; Nanoglou 2008; Tringham 1991). That is, both people and buildings have biographies, which are often intertwined intimately (Geller 2012b).

Ultimately, contextualizing bodies in physical space, historical period, and cultural setting allows for (and necessitates) bridging of specializations. To effectively investigate burials, physical anthropologists and archaeologists should not have distinct roles. In this regard, I disagree with Saul and Saul (1997, p. 50, 2002, p. 73), who identify the specialized roles as complementary, but mutually distinct. Rather, the complexities of Maya burials, as evidenced by body partibility, require researchers to be equally adept at skeletal analysis and conducting archaeological excavations—of burials and their associated architecture, not just the bodies therein. Indeed, Duday promotes this stance regardless of cultural and geographic context. "Funerary archaeologists," he (2009, p. 6) writes, "should have a training to be applied in the field which is not limited to collecting human bones and taking them to laboratories." A tomb from Dos Hombres in northwestern Belize provides an illustrative example of a bioarchaeological approach's utility and the interpretive problems that result when one is not implemented.

<sup>3</sup> Examination of life and death histories is in accord with Robb's (2002) expanded use of osteobiography (see also Geller 2012b).

<sup>4</sup> Duday finds archaeothanatology preferable to *l'anthropologie de terrain*, an expression he used in publications prior to 2005 but now find semantically inadequate (2009, p. 3).

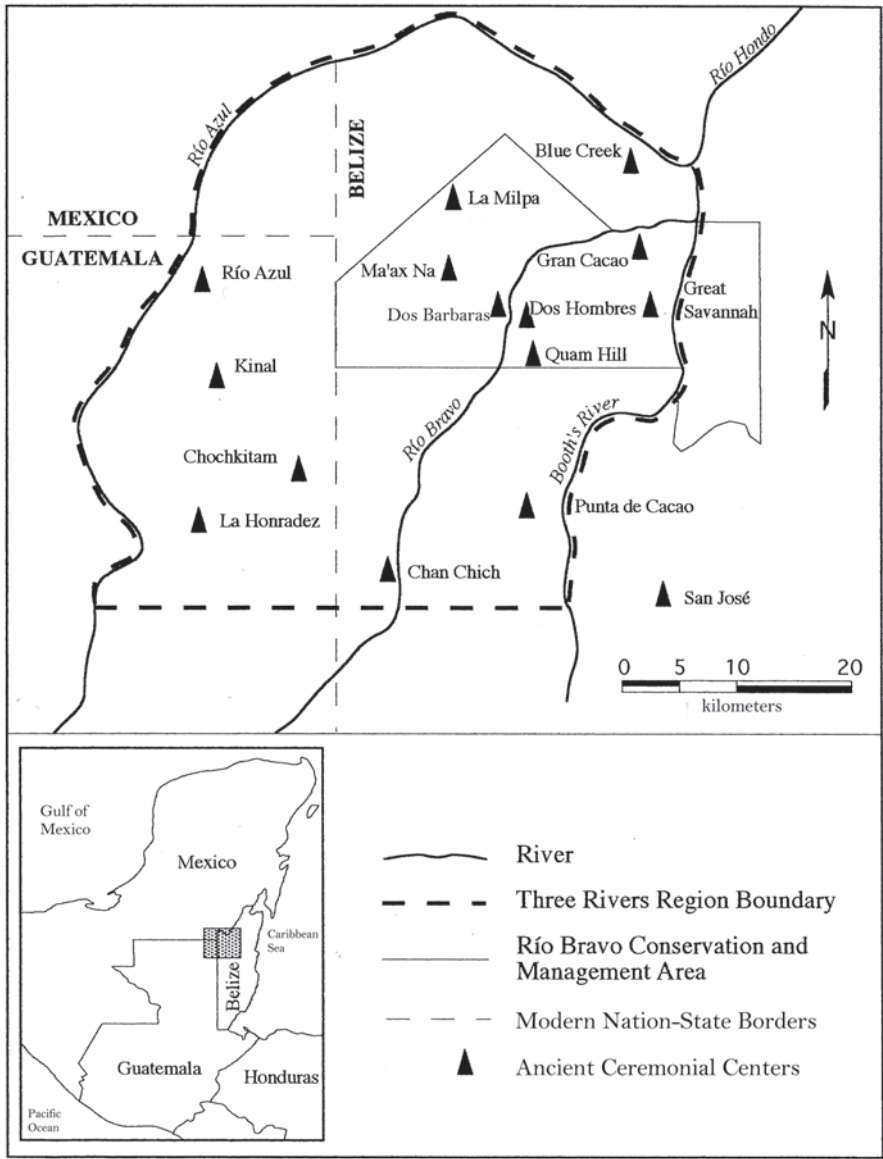


Fig. 2.1 Map of the Three Rivers region, northwestern Belize

### 2.3 Dos Hombres

Although not quite as sizeable as its neighbor La Milpa, Dos Hombres was a major center in the Three Rivers region (Fig. 2.1). As part of his doctoral work, Houk (1996) investigated Groups A and C, as well as Courtyards B-1, B-2, and B-3. Durst

(1998) excavated Group B's Courtyard B-4 from 1997 to 1998.<sup>5</sup> Aylesworth (2005) investigated Group D during his doctoral research. This collective work has shed light on the culture history of Dos Hombres and its relationship to other communities in the region.

Situated along the Río Bravo, the center was occupied from the Middle Preclassic to the Terminal Classic period. As with many other communities in the area, settlement growth had several cyclical peaks and valleys (Adams et al. 2004; Houk 1996; Sullivan 2002; Sullivan and Sagebiel 2003). Researchers have isolated an initial increase in population at the end of the Late Preclassic period (ca. 400 BC–AD 250), during which occupants erected monumental architecture. A decrease in population occurred, however, at the Late Preclassic–Early Classic period transition. In fact, Adams et al. (2004, pp. 328–329) describe the first part of the Early Classic (AD 250–400) as “a period of population depression,” which was followed by increases in the Early Classic period (AD 400 to 550) and mid-Late Classic period (AD 680–810). During the latter period, members of the Dos Hombres community set up house in previously unoccupied hinterland locales (Hageman 2004; Lohse 2001; Trachman 2007), while residential courtyards in the site core underwent architectural renovations. The architectural materializations of these demographic shifts were likely driven by the ebb and flow of sociopolitical events and exchanges throughout the Maya lowlands.

Researchers encountered a total of 14 burials in association with Groups A, B, and C at Dos Hombres. Of pertinence here are the nine burials recovered from Group B. This group is organized into four courtyards, Courtyards B-1, B-2, B-3, and B-4. In comparison to the center's other groups, Group B contained the largest number of burials. Excavators recovered all but one of Group B's nine burials from the buildings of Courtyard B-4. Excavations by Durst revealed an elite residence, replete with several ancillary cooking and storage buildings, as well as multiple construction phases. Located within Courtyard B-4, Structure B-16 yielded an important discovery. Beneath this building's cumulative floors was a stone-lined tomb containing two decedents, Individuals 65 and 132. Based on associated ceramic vessels, the tomb dated to the Early Classic period. Subsequent interment of those who died later in time, as I describe, indicates that proximity was intentional and referential.

## 2.4 The House-Sepulcher

For the Maya, placing select decedents into buildings that the living continued to utilize was a widespread practice. This link between domicile and death extended across social classes, but differed with respect to scale and elaboration. Monumental

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<sup>5</sup> My inferences about Courtyard B-4 and its associated burials are based on Durst's original documents. These materials, which have been in my custody since 2003, include burial forms, skeletal analysis reports from Saul and Saul, lot forms, maps, and drawings of burials. The PfBAP possesses copies of all materials.

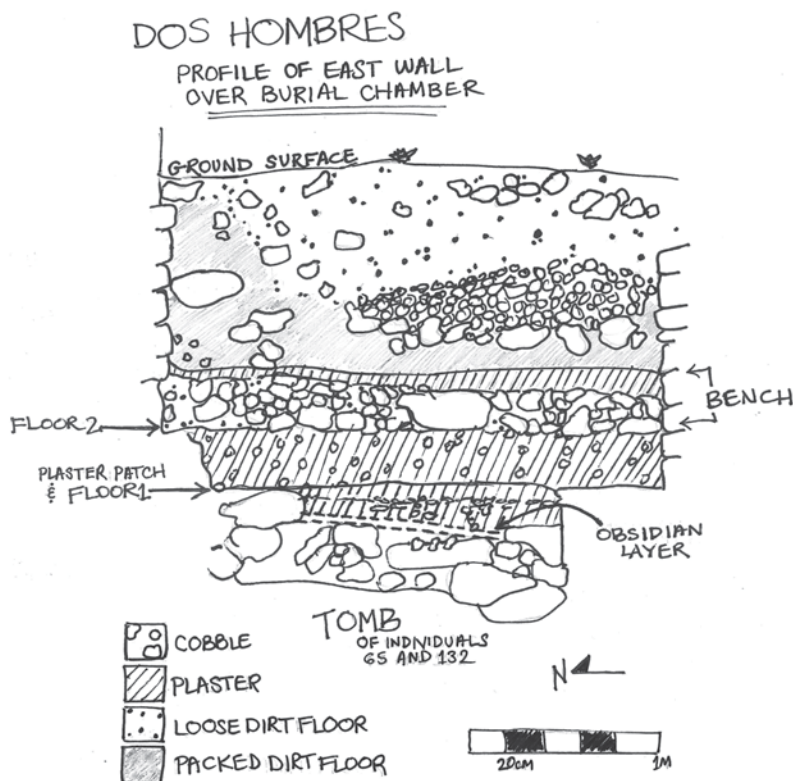


Fig. 2.2 Stratigraphic sequence of building episodes in Structure B-16

funerary temples entombing royal individuals, as Coe suggests, functioned as “house-sepulchers writ large” (1988, p. 235). At Dos Hombres’s Courtyard B-4, the house-sepulcher appears to be writ small. Placement of the Early Classic tomb in Courtyard B-4’s northeastern building reproduced an architectural variation on a pan-Maya theme. Specifically, archaeologists working throughout the Maya Lowlands have identified residential groups with eastern Structures that functioned as ancestral shrines; Becker (1971) deemed this layout a Plaza Plan 2 (see also Becker 1999; Welsh 1988). In the case of Structure B-16, decedents’ interments signal ritual remembrance and social vibrancy despite biological death (Geller 2006b; Gillespie 2001, 2002; McAnany 1995; Webster 1997).

Yet, biographical analysis of Structure B-16 also reveals a stratigraphic sequence of events that is complex, intriguing, and unique to Dos Hombres—a series of building renovations intimately tied to the life and death histories of its specific occupants (Fig. 2.2). Modern excavators first unearthed several layers of Late Classic construction. As one of their final renovations to Structure B-16, ancient occupants had filled in the building’s room. The demolition of Structure B-16’s western end provided the necessary materials for what was likely the last phase of construction (Jeff Durst,



personal communication 2002). Mourners had placed the simple grave of Individual 62, an adult of unknown sex, directly into the fill of this uppermost room. At the grave's lowest level, a polychrome vessel had been situated beneath the decedent's body. Just to the north of this vessel was an oblong ground stone object, small stone ball, shell bead, and greenstone pieces; a concentration of red paint was found north-west of the vessel. Inverted over the cranial remains was a second ceramic polychrome vessel, which also capped a greenstone bead and obsidian fragment. Very poor preservation, however, precluded a definitive statement about body condition or orientation, and excavators were untrained in skeletal analysis. Two more vessels were found west of the inhumation: an unspecified small vessel stacked inside of a black bowl. An obsidian core was unearthed east of these two vessels. While Individual 62's burial was materially and temporally distinct from the Early Classic tomb, which I describe later, it was spatially linked. These two graves, then, bracket the mortuary events that transpired during Structure B-16's occupation.

As excavators continued down through the strata of Structure B-16—going further back in time—they encountered two additional Late Classic burials (Individuals 61 and 66).<sup>6</sup> In the case of Individual 61, a 30–50-year-old female, a stratigraphically contextualized and osteotaphonomic approach yields important information about this poorly preserved burial.<sup>7</sup> Her simple grave was located above the tomb that housed Individuals 65 and 132. Since no discernible grave cut was associated with Individual 61 and her remains commingled with construction fill, it is possible that her interment provided the motivation for architectural renovation. Amongst this decedent's grave goods were obsidian blades, a shell ornament, and

<sup>6</sup> Excavators also encountered four Late Classic decedents in association with Structure B-12 (Individuals 67, 68, 69, and 70). Of note were the remains of Individuals 67, 68, and 69, clustered together and sandwiched between two floors. While excavators did not recover grave goods, their burial offered a wealth of information. Based on *in situ* observations, the body of Individual 67, a 30–40-year old of indeterminate sex, appeared flexed and on its right side with head west and hips east. The cranium of Individual 68, also of indeterminate sex but 20–30 years old, had been situated in the torso area of Individual 67. In contrast, Individual 68's body had been flexed and laid on its left side with the head south and hips north. These decedents' crossed bodies may have metaphorically replicated a quincunx, an arrangement that also appears in residential groups at Tikal (Chase and Chase 2004, p. 222). According to Foster (2002, p. 160), "The conceptualization of horizontal space as a quincunx—a quadripartite world plus its center—was a fundamental theme in Maya cosmology." The infant's body position was indeterminate as a consequence of preservation. Excavators did recover deciduous teeth in the area of Individual 67's cranium. Developmental age indicates that this individual had been 2–4 years old. Decedents' proximity and the absence of a discernible grave cut suggest generational concurrence and familial relations. The burial's stratigraphic level also appears to line up with that of Individual 61's grave in Structure B-16, which suggests that all decedents were contemporaries. Similar to Individual 61, the interment(s) of Individuals 67, 68, and 69 may have supplied the impetus for Structure B-12's renovation.

<sup>7</sup> During excavation and skeletal analysis, Individual 61 had been identified as three distinct individuals. My subsequent reassessment of documentation determined that all human remains were located at the same elevation (178 cmbd). And while the burial was scattered throughout four adjacent sub-operations, all of which measured 2 m × 2 m, it was within a constrained space. The human remains were poorly preserved; a circle of darker soil indicated their location. The elements present, especially the teeth, point to a MNI of one.



**Fig. 2.3** Individual 66 in situ. (Photograph taken by Jeff Durst 1998)



19 pieces of mica. Associated architectural features indicate that later occupants of Structure B-16 (like Individual 62) maintained interactions with the biologically dead but socially vital. Namely, a red plaster bench<sup>8</sup> erected atop floor 2 and to the east of Individual 61's body offers evidence of ancestor veneration (Fig. 2.2). Within domiciles throughout the Maya world, benches, amongst other functions, often served as household shrines, and interment of ancestors within or beneath these architectural features was a common occurrence (Geller 2006b; Gillespie 2002; Welsh 1988, p. 188).

Decedents' deaths did not always prompt major architectural renovations. The burial of Individual 66, for example, signals the complex factors that shaped material choices and mortuary practices. Excavators unearthed this decedent further to the west of and about 60 cm lower than Individual 62. The grave was an intentional pit that cut through the plaster of Floor 2.<sup>9</sup> Mourners had removed construction fill from beneath the floor to accommodate the body. Individual 66, a male 25–30 years of age, had been loosely flexed and laid to rest on his right side, head north and hips south (Fig. 2.3). The exact location of his grave goods went undocumented, but excavators recovered a ceramic sphere (1.5 cm in diameter), ten assorted stone objects (lithic debitage, hammerstones, tool fragments), and about 200 ceramic sherds from within the grave space. At its close, the grave was filled with a fine-grained, light gray, and densely packed soil. A resurfacing of the floor covered the opening. About 36 cm atop the grave, excavators unearthed a well-crafted mano adjacent to a metate.

The graves in Structure B-16, for the most part, remained sealed but with one important exception. Replastering of Floor 1 indicates that an ancient, intrusive cut had been made into this feature during a reentry episode. Below Floor 1, excavators uncovered an uneven layer of obsidian approximately 2 cm thick. Around 21,730

<sup>8</sup> The bench measured about 15 cm in height.

<sup>9</sup> The pit was about 55 cm deep and measured 158 cm N-S and 148 cm E-W.

pieces of obsidian comprised the hoard (Trachman and Titmus 2003, p. 108), which was encased partially within a thin plaster coating and grouped into distinct deposits. Pockets of fine debitage were isolated in one area, blades and bladelets in another area, and cores and core fragments in yet a separate area. There is also evidence that this obsidian layer had been disturbed in antiquity, quite possibly with the intent of reentering the Early Classic tomb (Jeff Durst, personal communication 2002). Underneath the northern edge of the obsidian layer was a layer of chert flakes.

Such strata, while intriguing and a bit perplexing, are not unique. Excavators have encountered layers of chert, flint, and/or obsidian capping tombs at sites throughout the Maya lowlands. We see these configurations at Altun Ha (Pendergast 1979), Caracol (Chase and Chase 1987, p. 15; Chase and Chase 1996), Chau Hiix (Chiarulli and Barrick 1997), La Milpa (Geller 2004; Mongelluzzo 1997), and Lamanai (Pendergast 1981) in Belize; and Río Azul (Hall 1989) and Tikal in Guatemala (Moholy-Nagy 1997; Trik 1963)]. At Tikal, for instance, excavators documented strata of obsidian and flint flakes atop the tomb of Burial 116, “literally thousands” in the words of excavator Aubrey Trik (1963, p. 5). In fact, these deposits were layered over a total of eight Classic period tombs. Not all individuals’ tombs at Tikal were capped, however. To explain their presence, Moholy-Nagy (1997, p. 307) has suggested that deposits accumulated when producers of stone tools rid themselves of unneeded refuse—“debitage dumps, presumably rationalized as offerings.” Pragmatics seem too simplistic an explanation for the powerful events that certainly surrounded the entombment of a socially significant decedent. Hall (1989, p. 308), on the other hand, has suggested that concentrations of obsidian and chert may have symbolized the physical remnants of lightning strikes down from the heavens. There is also evidence that Post-Classic Cakchiquel Maya fashioned their divine oracle, Chay Abah, from a great block of obsidian, which they believe emerged from Xibalba (Brinton 1969, p. 43). The link between obsidian or chert and cosmological beliefs is underscored in these alternative accounts.

At Dos Hombres, the layers of obsidian and chert were atop additional fill layers comprised of large cobbles, soil, and small rubble. Interspersed sporadically throughout this fill were smaller pockets of obsidian. Capstones formed the penultimate stratum. Excavators then reached the stone-lined, oblong-shaped tomb, which measured roughly 2.7 m from east to west, 1.2 m from north to south, and 60 cm in height.<sup>10</sup> Fill inside of the tomb included large stones, which may have capped the grave when it was originally sealed but were disturbed during reentry.

With regard to human remains entombed within, excavators did work from methodological standards set by Saul and Saul, but they had little prior experience excavating burials or identifying partial skeletal elements. Initially, excavators documented the presence of one primary individual, Individual 65. This possible male, who was 25–34 years at the time of death, was fully articulated and extended; his head situated at the tomb’s eastern end and his feet at its western one. The position of this individual’s skull, however, perplexed the excavators. They recorded it as

<sup>10</sup> According to Welsh, a tomb’s “height is sufficient for a human to stand, i.e. ca. 135 cms. or more” (1988, p. 18). Although such is not the case at Dos Hombres, the architectural complexity, unusual construction fill, and abundant grave goods of the burial in question offer strong evidence for a typological designation of tomb and not crypt.

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