

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE RIO BEC REGION

by

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The archaeological area known as the "Río Bec region" possesses great potential to provide new perspectives concerning cultural developments of the Maya lowlands in prehispanic times. Not only does the region exhibit characteristics divergent from those of many other parts of the Maya lowlands, but it also occupies a strategic geographical location at the northern frontier of what many Mayanists have considered the "core" of Maya civilization. This potential has been recognized by scholars who have approached the study of this region from various research perspectives. As is true for many archaeological pursuits, this diversity of research interests has produced a somewhat disjointed corpus of published information.

To help rectify this problem, this thesis synthesizes and evaluates the most complete and valuable areas of research available from the published material. These areas, chronological and architectural studies, provide a solid framework by which to examine the present data, and to elucidate what types of research should be pursued to help complete the understanding of processes of culture evolution at work in the Río Bec region.

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CHAPTER 1

THE STUDY AREA

INTRODUCTION

The Río Bec region lies at the southeastern base of the modern Mexican state of Campeche and extends to some degree into southwestern Quintana Roo (fig. 1). Significantly, the region's boundaries are rather arbitrarily designated: the region, as it is known, refers to the group of sites that display a specific architectural style at one archaeological period, the Late Classic. For the present study, however, this geographic representation provides a fitting focus for evaluating aspects of cultural evolution in one part of the Maya lowlands. Situated almost directly in the center of the Maya lowlands, at the northern frontier of the 'southern lowlands', and, significantly, in the narrowest portion of the Yucatán Peninsula between the Caribbean and the Gulf of Campeche (Ball 1977: 1), the communities occupying the Río Bec region surely occupied a vital position in the dynamic economic, social, and political developments that shaped and reshaped the face of the Maya lowlands over time. In order to begin to grasp the nature of this role, it is necessary to look at the area from the many perspectives available to us through archaeology.

Fig. 1 Map of the Yucatán Peninsula showing major architectural regions (Gendrop 1983: fig. 9).



Ideally, archaeology should provide the tools by which we could track and define the evolution of culture in the region, from the simple egalitarian farming communities of the Middle Preclassic, to the complex hierarchical sociopolitical organization that characterized the Late Classic period, to the splintered communities of the Postclassic. More precisely, these tools should show how and why changes or pressures helped cause such developments; whether those pressures were rooted in competition for resources, warfare, increased trade, environmental stress of some sort, or some other type of stress. The former task is better realized in the archaeological record than the latter: that is, patterns of change are comparably easier to detect by setting artifact, architecture, settlement, and agricultural data against a strong chronological backdrop. The reasons for and mechanisms of change are not so easily detected, but new methods and models continue to be proposed and tested. Few such methods have been applied to the Río Bec region, mainly because there is a dearth of necessary evidence to assist in these endeavors.

In an effort to exhibit the potential the Río Bec region has to provide the tools to fulfill the aforementioned goals, I synthesize the somewhat disjointed published information relating to the culture history and Late Classic architecture of the region, and evaluate its effectiveness in addressing questions of how and why the region developed the way it did. Through the exploration of these two avenues of research, various preliminary models by which to explicate the intricate nature of changes in political, social, and economic organization and interaction at various levels of integration begin

to emerge.

Fortunately, a secure and thorough ceramic sequence has been constructed for the region, allowing for a basic culture historical examination (Chapter 3) of the ceramic, lithic, architectural, agricultural, and settlement evidence from the period of the Middle Preclassic (600 B.C.) to the Postclassic period (A.D. 1000). Through the examination of this chronology, I mark the major trends and changes apparent in each aspect through time, and how the initiation of these trends and changes might have been influenced by sources outside of the region. Because the region's spatial and temporal bounds are uncertain, establishment of a basic chronology is elemental to revealing the changing face of the region. Examining the proposed culture history should at least help provoke further study of the changes in political, social, and economic systems, over space and time, and at every observed level of integration.

It will become apparent through the chronological discussion that the Late Classic represents the period for which researchers have retrieved and analyzed the most information. The bias toward the Late Classic finds grounds not only in the fact that more architectural evidence from that period survives relative to other periods, but also in the reality that the Late Classic embodies a period of unequalled population growth, monumental construction, settlement density, and agricultural intensification in the region.

Because of the unusual accessibility and preservation of the standing architecture, much of the published material analyzes various aspects of the Late Classic Río Bec

architectural style. The extensive studies pertaining to various aspects of Late Classic architecture provide a unique perspective by which to examine this period and to subsequently approach those periods preceding and following the Late Classic. A review and analysis of these studies (Chapter 4) reveals intriguing insight into the nature of development and sociopolitical evolution in the Río Bec region, illustrating a divergence from what is known for its neighboring regions to its north (the Chenes region), its east (southern Quintana Roo and northern Belize), and its south (the Petén) for the Late Classic period; a divergence that begs explanation and reconciliation.

Finally, through this process of evaluation of culture history and Late Classic architecture, the factors that hinder the progress of inquiry into the unique development of the Río Bec region are considered, and suggestions for research that will effectively eliminate those factors are made. In the final analysis (Chapter 5), I 1) consolidate the inventory of 'tools' the evidence from the Río Bec region already provides, 2) propose what 'tools' may be adapted from the available evidence, and 3) review what evidence needs to be obtained to competently address the social, political, and economic developments and organization of the culture(s) that occupied the Río Bec region, and how these developments affected and were affected by the other groups in the Maya lowlands.

ENVIRONMENT

Most of the Río Bec region lies within a somewhat similar environmental setting.

The characterization of the topography, soil, vegetation, and climate accords with what one would expect of a region that lies between the Petén and the northern part of the Yucatán Peninsula. Located near the southern edge of the limestone plateau that characterizes the Yucatán Peninsula, the region's topography is one that alternates between bajo areas and low, flat-topped limestone ridges, generally oriented east-west and rising about 50 meters above the bajos (Turner 1983: 54). Limestone outcrops like those in the north are uncommon, outcropping usually limited to the hill slopes. Soil depth also falls between that to the north and to the south. Where soil cover in northern Yucatán is generally very thin and that in Petén reaches depths up to several meters, soil in southern Campeche and Quintana Roo can vary from relatively thin on slopes, to a meter deep on the ridge-tops (Thomas 1981a: 1-4).

Soil and vegetation vary with the topography. The well-drained ridges and hills typically have fertile, loam soil, and support high forest vegetation. Hilly land, common in southern Campeche, constitutes as much as 60 percent of the land in the Río Bec region. The swampy, poorly drained bajos are typified by infertile clayey soils that support ordinary scrub-forest vegetation. (Turner 1983: 55,60,62). So, in terms of soil and vegetation, the higher elevations seem to resemble the Petén while the lower areas are more reminiscent of the north. Of course, there is more variation in these characteristics throughout the study area, partially due to differential erosion and other effects of landscape modification over time.

“The lower Yucatán peninsular area is dominated by a hot subhumid climate that

includes a distinct wet and dry season” (Turner 1983: 55). The wet season lasts from about May to December and average annual rainfall is approximately 125 cm., though actual rainfall tends to be somewhat unpredictable and inconsistent from year to year. The variation in rainfall can prove problematic for a population that relies on certain amounts of water for their crops. This would be true of today’s population, and probably more so for the larger, more delicately balanced population of the Classic period (Thomas 1981a: 2; Turner 1983: 55).

The water table tends to be rather deep in the region, reaching depths beyond 120 meters. As a result, the Río Bec region sees little in the way of surface water, with the exception of a few small lakes (Turner 1983: 54). Additionally, while rainfall is substantial during the wet season, the region does not benefit from the cenotes known in the north, or the streams and rivers that run through the south. Instead, aguadas, clay-lined basins originally built by the inhabitants to trap water, continue to be used by people living in the area today. Presently, the aguadas prove sufficient most of the time for supplying a population with water, but can dry up quickly in times of minor droughts, causing problems for the small communities that depend on them. As a result, another limiting environmental factor for the modern population of what comprises the Río Bec region is water availability and storage for the dry season. What would the situation have been in the Late Classic when the population, much denser than the current population, reached its zenith in the region?

Considering that aguadas are the only known major source of water from the

Classic period, water availability must have presented an enormous stress to the inhabitants at that time. Most importantly, this description of the environment of the Río Bec region does not necessarily represent the situation of the region in prehispanic times. Variable modifications of the landscape and environmental responses over time surely altered the environment throughout prehispanic times and affected the environment that we observe in the region today. An intensive program of palaeoecological studies would be invaluable in allowing for the evaluation and analysis of the stresses that gave the ancient Maya cause to modify their environment, of the mechanisms they used to do so, and of the long-term climatic, environmental, and cultural consequences of their actions (Thomas 1981a: 1-2).

CHAPTER 2

HISTORY OF INVESTIGATIONS IN THE RIO BEC REGION

INTRODUCTION

The Río Bec region has seen an almost continuous surge of explorative and investigative missions since the beginning of the century, with a short hiatus occurring in the 1950's. Luckily, most of the results have been widely published. More recent extensive research, excavation and consolidation projects of the last decade or so, however, unfortunately suffer from a comparative lack of publication, especially of publication available outside of Mexico. Most likely owing to the abundance of work that archaeologists have conducted in the area and now need to process, the problem appears to be in the process of being remedied, as researchers' publications are catching up with their large amounts of work.

EARLY EXPLORATION AND INVESTIGATION

The first significant investigations in the Río Bec region were conducted around the turn of this century. Comte Maurice de Perigny, exploring throughout southern Campeche and southern Quintana Roo, was the first to record the presence of the 'Río Bec tower complex' (1908). In 1912, Raymond Merwin and Clarence Hay, under the

auspices of Harvard University's Peabody Museum, recorded some basic architectural information for a few sites (Hay 1935; Merwin 1913). Probably the most exhaustive early study of the region was that recording the results of the survey and reconnaissance expeditions of Karl Ruppert and John Denison between 1932 and 1938 through the Carnegie Institution of Washington (Ruppert and Denison 1943). These expeditions took the team to sites in the Petén of northern Guatemala and to sites in southern Campeche and southern Quintana Roo, approximately twenty-five of which probably fall within the Río Bec region. Full descriptions of the arrangement of mounds and of standing architecture accompanied by pictures, drawings, and sketch maps of a multitude of sites combine to establish this important resource as one of consistent value and authority.

Numerous other smaller investigative projects were carried out during the following decades. For example, Ruppert returned to the area with George Brainerd in 1949, primarily to gain new information about the sites of Xpuhil and Zoh Laguna. Neither published their results, but Harry Pollock later provided a short synthesis of their field notes (1967). In 1967, Francis Murphy and R.S. Callvert also visited the region, and casually reported their visits to the better-known sites of Xpuhil and Becan (Callvert 1969).

UNIVERSITY/ NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY PROJECTS

More intensive research began in the late 1960's. Following the various investigations of the region by Jack Eaton and E. Wyllys Andrews IV, Tulane

University's Middle American Research Institute (M.A.R.I.) and the National Geographic Society jointly sponsored a series of projects in the region from 1969 to 1971. The results of the following major research projects were published: the excavation of Structure IV at Becán (Potter 1977) and various structures at Chicanná (Eaton 1972; 1974), a ceramic analysis (Ball 1977), a lithic analysis (Rovner 1974), analysis of Becán's defensive earthworks (Webster 1974; 1976), studies of architectural style (E. W. Andrews IV 1974; Ball and E. W. Andrews V 1978; Potter 1977). Almost immediately after this period of investigation, Prentice Thomas conducted an extensive settlement study with the support of the University of Tennessee and the National Geographic Society (1974; 1981a; 1981b).

The next program of investigation, again conducted under the auspices of the National Geographic Society, this time in conjunction with the University of Texas at San Antonio and the University of Wisconsin, Madison, "was oriented toward producing information on the Río Bec region that would aid . . . in understanding the ecological as well as the culture-historical context of the failure of Maya Classic period civilization . . . [and] to gain data on the periods before and after that event" (Adams 1981a: 43-5). The project resulted in the publication of studies concerning settlement patterns (Adams 1977; 1981b; Thomas 1981a; 1981b), agriculture intensification technologies (Turner 1979; 1983), and more ceramic and lithic analysis (Ball 1977; Rovner 1974; Stoltman 1978). By 1973, the majority of work done by American researchers was completed (Adams 1981b: 216).

GOVERNMENT-SPONSORED RESEARCH

The Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (I.N.A.H.) of Mexico initiated the next major archaeological work in the region in 1983. With Román Piña Chán serving as director, an intensive project of preservation led to the excavation and consolidation of Structures I, II, III, IV and X of Becán, Structure I and Structure II at Xpuhil, and Structure I and XX at Chicanná (G. Andrews 1988). In 1984, after Piña suffered a fall, the I.N.A.H. installed a new program, named the Proyecto Arqueológico Frontera Sur, to coordinate smaller projects at various sites in southern Campeche. Individual project directors continued reconnaissance, excavation, and consolidation work, as well as new ceramic collections. Augustín Peña, Sylvianne Boucher and Ramón Carrasco worked primarily on Structures III, VI, XVII- annex, and XX of Chicanná (Carrasco Vargas 1994), Structure I of Río Bec B and Structure XVII at Río Bec I; Dr. Román Piña Chán led excavation and consolidation on Structures I, I-annex, and II of Xpuhil's Group I (Piña Chán 1985); and Ricardo Bueno Cano coordinated work at Structure II at Hormiguero (Bueno Cano 1991). These projects represent the majority of intensive excavation projects in the region. While the majority of the projects were completed by the late 1980's, research at these and other sites continues to provide new information, that, once published, will add significantly to the present understanding of the Río Bec region.

OTHER RECENT WORK

Many of the more recent publications take the form of more specific analyses born out of already existing research, recent fieldwork results of the I.N.A.H., and the recent series of independent and cooperative architectural studies conducted primarily by G. Andrews and Gendrop (G. Andrews 1987; 1988; 1989; G. Andrews and Gendrop 1991; Bueno Cano 1991; 1992; Carrasco Vargas 1994; Carrasco Vargas et al. 1984; Gendrop 1980; 1983; 1985a; 1985b; 1987; Hohmann 1987a; 1987b; Martos López 1989; Pascual Soto 1987; Piña Chán 1985). While these studies are useful and allow for consideration of intriguing questions concerning the area, too often they do not provide the basic data from which the analyses were made. Without a visit to the several central offices of the I.N.A.H., such basic data are as yet not readily available.

Additionally, many people have continued the search for 'lost' or previously unrecorded sites. One of the most important of these discoveries was in 1973 when Gillette Griffin, Hugh and Suzanne Johnston, and Andy Seufert rediscovered Río Bec B (first reported by Merwin in 1913), and found the unrecorded site of Río Bec N (Seufert 1974). Since that time, the publication *Mexicon* has carried notices of numerous other unexpected discoveries, including, among others, the site of Xuxna (Mayer 1990); Ramonal F (Mayer 1995); and Balamku (García Cruz 1991), whose ornate sculptured facade was consolidated later in 1991 by Julio Chan through the I.N.A.H. (Benavides Castillo 1991).

THE GROUP OF SITES NAMED 'RIO BEC'

Because of the potential confusion associated with the group of sites named Río Bec, their history deserves special consideration and explanation. Basically, approximately twenty-one different adjacent groups of sites have been identified and named Río Bec. De Perigny is the first to see and subsequently record a site with the name Río Bec. This site is now known as Río Bec A. Merwin and Hay's expedition located five more groups, named Río Bec B through F (Merwin 1913: 79-95). As mentioned above, group B was 'lost' after this expedition until relocated in 1973 (Seufert 1974). Ruppert and Denison disrupted the alphabetical listing, naming their five newly discovered groups Río Bec I through V (Ruppert and Denison 1943: 30-36). Of significant note, Merwin's Río Bec F is part of Ruppert and Denison's Río Bec I and his Group E is Ruppert and Denison's Group IV. Eaton found more groups during his reconnaissance missions in 1971 and called them Río Bec VI through VIII (Potter 1977: 98). Recent projects of the I.N.A.H. have identified more groups, and, returning to the alphabetical system, have named them Río Bec G through N, Group N being the same site first recorded by Seufert (who failed to name it) and subsequently named by Eaton Group VI (G. Andrews 1988).

If the confusion evident in the location and naming of these sites achieves little else, it should indicate the difficulties inherent in locating sites in this region, the probability that numerous other sites probably remain hidden and unrecognized, and the importance of thorough, consistent, and accurate reporting and publication of new sites,

including detailed descriptions, photographs, drawings, and coordinates. The relationship of the numerous Río Bec sites to one another is elusive and will remain so as long as their details remain unknown, or poorly reported.

CHAPTER 3

CHRONOLOGY OF THE RIO BEC REGION

INTRODUCTION

The primary motivation for establishing a chronology for the Río Bec region is to provide basic data that help illuminate various aspects of the cultural evolution and cultural context of the region through time. Such aspects include: 1) events associated with or responsible for the origins of settled life and a trend toward cultural complexity; 2) the degradation and eventual dissolution of the centers in the region; and, most importantly, 3) the environmental conditions, and intersite and interregional relations that influenced the particular trends and events that accounted for these changes over time.

The establishment of a culture history does not directly lead to the resolution of problems associated with the changing nature of political, economic, and social development.

Rather it should be viewed as a vital tool, a baseline, from which to ask more pertinent questions and apply methodologies that can assess what was happening in those cultural contexts that could have led to the prevalent changes in the region.

Additionally, this culture history is far from complete for the Río Bec region.

Most of the information, based on the work done through the Tulane University- National Geographic Society projects and published by the Middle American Research Institute, focuses specifically on the site and environs of Becán, and its closest neighboring sites of Chicanná and Xpuhil. So, not only does this synthesis provide a jumping off point for more pointed studies of culture change, but it also illustrates the need to broaden its focus in order to test the elements of culture history against results from the rest of the region.

The ceramic sequence, established by Ball (1977), provides the basic chronology for the Río Bec region. The sequence rests mainly on ceramic collections from excavations at Becán and Chicanná, as well as some from additional test pits at Xpuhil and Hormiguero (Ball 1977: 1). Lithic information is based on Rovner's analysis of lithics from Becán and Chicanná (1974), and substantiated by Stoltman's discussion of specific types found primarily at Becán in 1973 through the Río Bec Ecological Project (Stoltman 1978). Adams, Thomas, and Webster have published most of the data relating to settlement and population patterns (Adams 1977; 1981b; Thomas 1981a; 1981b; Webster 1974; 1976). Turner has provided the most exhaustive agricultural information (1983). A broad architectural sequence, based almost solely on the excavations at Becán and Eaton's work at Chicanná, has been executed by Potter (1977).

The following chronological presentation of ceramic, lithic, architectural, agricultural and settlement evidence, including references to the existence and extent of interaction with other regions, should provide an introduction to the culture history of the Río Bec region as the published material allows. Significantly, architectural information

is dealt with broadly in this chronological context. Late Classic architecture will be given more thorough consideration in Chapter 4.

PRECLASSIC

Ceramic Sequence

The first evidence for a settled population, manifested primarily through the presence of ceramics, comes from the Acachen phase, thought by Ball to have begun as early as the Middle Preclassic in 600 B.C., and to have lasted until 300 B.C., when the Pakluum phase slowly began to emerge. Ball believes the Acachen feasibly could represent two facets; the first lasting from 600 B.C. to 500 B.C., and the second extending to about 300 or 200 B.C. The Acachen complex proves ceramically similar and chronologically equivalent to the Mamom horizon that originated in the Petén and marks the Middle Preclassic in other parts of the lowlands (Ball 1977: 127-9).

The most prominent ceramic groups in early facet Acachen include Joventud Red, similar to the Sierra Red group, and the monochrome black Chunhinta group, the latter appearing with less frequency in the late facet. Cuspidor and flaring-side plates, and the few tecomates that exist in the sample are most commonly found in the Joventud group. Additionally, the Joventud group is the only group to yield vertically-oriented, oval section spouts, important Mamom markers. The Chunhinta group emerges primarily in the form of restricted-orifice bowls. Both Chunhinta and Joventud groups reveal the production of "a restricted-neck, thickened-rim bottle form identical to that reported by

Brainerd from sub-Chicanel deposits at Mani, Yucatan" (Ball 1977: 128). The association with Yucatán suggests that Becán was involved in a system of trade that extended throughout the Maya lowlands from the south in the Petén to northern Yucatán.

The late facet Acachen complex consists of a dichrome Muxanal group, not present in the early facet, and an Achiotes unslipped group. The Muxanal group generally is found in the form of "flat-bottomed dishes with outsloping to flaring sides and rounded or beveled lips" (Ball 1977: 128). Wide-mouthed, high-necked jar forms, often with strap handles, are the most common forms for the Achiotes group. Strap handles, seen also in Joventud and Chunhinta groups, seem restricted to the Acachen complex (Ball 1977: 127-8).

The most diagnostic means of decoration for the entire Acachen complex are prefired, preslip groove incisions in single or double labial lines. Less common decoration includes chamfering, reed-impression, and zone incision. The double-line break, common throughout Mesoamerica in the Middle Preclassic, appears absent in the Acachen complex (Potter 1977: 127-8).

Mamom and Acachen traditions share the important markers of Muxanal Red-on-cream, vertically-oriented, oval-section spouts; chamfering; and cuspidor shapes. These commonalities suggest that the people producing Acachen ceramics interacted within the larger Mamom horizon. Because the earliest ceramics are of advanced quality and known types, Ball believes these people might have immigrated from elsewhere, likely the Petén where the Mamom horizon flourished. Additionally, based on the absence of later

Mamom markers such as Mars Orange Ware and resist-decorated red-on-buff examples, Ball suggests the immigration occurred before these markers emerged; or sometime around 500 B.C. Whether or not this hypothesis proves true, the evidence does indicate a progressive divergence of the late facet Acachen complex from the Mamom horizon, suggesting an emphasis on active regionalization at Becán, and perhaps in the Río Bec region in general (Ball 1977: 129,151).

Features of the following Pakluum ceramic complex were emerging as early as 300 B.C., and were fully realized by 200 B.C. The phase, persisting until about A.D. 250 and roughly divided into three indistinct facets, corresponds quite readily to the Chicanel horizon. It shares with it many of the markers for the Late Preclassic in the southern lowlands (Adams 1977: 81).

Some important groups for the Pakluum complex include the Rastro Variety of Sapote Striated, most commonly found in the form of wide-mouthed, low-necked jars and restricted-orifice bowls; red Sierra, the most common slipped group, rendered in the form of everted rim or medial-ridged dishes; and less frequently, a Polvero Black group (Ball 1977: 129).

Other groups can be loosely designated to certain facets of the Pakluum. Hongo Composite, a group widely represented in the Pasión drainage, and Repasto Black-on-red, both probably were first introduced in the early facet (300 B.C.- 50 B.C.). Late facet (50 B.C.- A.D. 150) groups/types include Zapatista Trickle-on-cream-brown and Ciego Composite. The terminal facet of Pakluum sees the emergence of several interesting

groups, types, and/or forms: Escobal Red-on-buff, often displaying a grooved-hooked rim mode on bowls; Xoclan Trickle-on-variegated red bolstered rim basins; Tacopate Trickle-on-brown; and the sharp z-angle bowl form (Ball 1977: 130).

The great variety of decoration seen for the Acachen complex is substantially less for the Pakluum. Interestingly, the Pakluum ceramic complex gives rise to the Early Classic Chaksik, apparently without significant evidence of a Protoclassic ceramic complex. As Ball relates, "although no true Protoclassic complex occurs at Becán, Usulután-like types and positive-painted imitations thereof do occur along with mammiform-footed, polychrome tetrapods as minor components of the terminal facet of the Pakluum phase, indicating contact with regions experiencing a fuller Protoclassic manifestation" (1974: 113). Thus, the evidence shows that the Río Bec region continued trade relations with areas in Yucatán and the Petén through the Pakluum phase, while continuing its trend toward a regional or independent style (Ball 1977: 130,151).

Lithics

As is true for most of the life of Becán in the Preclassic, the lithic evidence corresponds well with the ceramic evidence. While Acachen does not provide much in the way of lithic evidence, Pakluum samples consist of more chipped stone artifacts than the samples for all other phases (Stoltman 1978: 19). Bifacially flaked axes or celts, possibly used to cut down trees for swidden agriculture, are numerous in the lithic assemblage at this time. Unifacially retouched flakes are also found within the Pakluum

phase lithic assemblage. The presence of clear and milky obsidian, sourced to central Mexico, indicates that by the Late Preclassic, Becán was already engaged in some degree of long distance trade (Rovner 1974: 128).

Rovner sees the suggestion of long distance trade as conflicting with his contention that ". . . the absence of cherts from other regions of the Yucatan Peninsula argues against local trade relations" (1974: 128). That argument presumes that trade relations must have relied on chert. While local cherts admittedly were of comparatively poor quality, they could have sufficiently served local needs. Obsidian, on the other hand, consistently considered more desirable than chert, understandably could have helped initiate trade over long distances.

Architectural and Settlement Evidence

Architectural and settlement information is lacking for the Middle Preclassic. The Acachen Phase is typical of the lowland Middle Preclassic in that few remains survive to illustrate a pattern of settlement. Nothing in the way of permanent structures has been found, and artifact material is confined to middens. Thomas argues that because "no traces of preceramic hunting and gathering peoples have been found in the region" (1981a: 96), it is conceivable that people did not settle at Becán until the Middle Preclassic. At that time they probably only represented "a small population distributed in widely scattered hamlets consisting of perishable houses [which] evidently subsisted on slash-and-burn agriculture" (Thomas 1981a: 96).

In contrast, the Late Preclassic Pakluum phase represents the beginning of widespread construction within the Becán ceremonial center and throughout the rural settlement area surrounding it. While to what extent the visible 'ceremonial center' was already regarded as a center is unclear, the inhabitants of the area had begun building some monumental architecture there by A.D. 50. Features of construction emerging during this phase include simple platforms, sometimes affixed to pyramidal bases, with walled superstructures, thatched roofs, inset stairways, rounded corners, and fine plaster surfaces, often painted red. Also during this period, 500 square meters of plaster pavement was laid, usually in association with the platform structures (Adams 1977: 82).

Similar construction has been found outside the core of Becán, primarily in the form of plazuela groups. It is obvious from the settlement studies that the population was on the rise in the late part of the Pakluum phase, and that settlement had become more dense, especially in areas close to water sources and fertile agricultural land (Thomas 1981a: 97). While there does not seem to be any obvious wealth differential between the core and the periphery, there is evidence of some social stratification within the site as a whole. For example, "a Pakluum double burial, Burial 4, found in Str. 8E-46 in a plazuela more than 1 km from the center, . . . contained a mano of igneous stone and cylindrical jade beads" (Thomas 1981a: 97-98). So, wealth might not have been concentrated in the center by the Pakluum phase, but trade definitely existed, as did the beginnings of a more complex society.

Most significantly, terminal facet Pakluum marks the probable time for the building of the defensive earthworks around Becán (Webster 1976). Because these fortifications appear to have been most active during the Early Classic, however, their significance will be discussed in greater detail below.

EARLY CLASSIC

Ceramic Sequence

The Early Classic Chacsik ceramic phase, lasting from approximately A.D. 250 to A.D. 450 and divided into an early and a late facet, reveals the use of a much wider variety of types than previously known, indicating profound influence from and/or contact with areas throughout the Maya lowlands. The Petén still remains the primary region of influence, however: the Chacsik corresponds well with the Tzakol ceramic sphere from Uaxactun in the Petén (Ball 1974; 1977).

Early facet Chacsik (A.D. 250- A.D. 400) sees the survival of several groups and types: Xoclan Trickle-on-variegated red, Tacopate Trickle-on-brown, and basal-flanged, ring-based dishes dominate the Chacsik ceramic record. Additionally, Aguila Orange, rounded z-angle bowls, and herringbone striation persist from Pakluum. San Blas Red-on-orange, Dos Arroyos Orange Polychrome on bowls and dishes, Balanza Black, Lucha Incised, and Sambula Black-on-gray represent some of the additions emerging during early facet Chacsik (Ball 1977: 131).

Most early facet Chacsik ceramics endure through the short-lived late facet (A.D. 400- A.D. 450) with some changes and additions. For example, the Opuesto Variety of Dos Arroyos Orange gains in popularity, as do Balanza Black, Sambula Black-on-gray, and Lucha Incised. A new trickle-on-tan type and the Dzaptun Variety of Saxche Orange Polychrome are introduced. Also, new decoration shows up on some forms: "Late facet Chacsik water storage jars are characterized by ungrooved, outfolded rims with triangular cross-sections. Horizontal striations appear on the vessel necks, and appliqué and/or impressed decorative additions are often present on vessel shoulders" (Ball 1977: 131). So, while many characteristics carry over from the early facet, some innovations are evident for this short period. Generally, Chacsik ceramics suggest that Becan still had some contact with people in the north and in the Petén region.

Immediately following Chacsik emerges the brief but distinct Sabucan phase, dating from about A.D. 450 to about A.D. 630. While certain elements of Chacsik complex, such as Tacopate Trickle-on-brown, and herringbone patterning and horizontal striation on Triunfo Striated jars, survive, Sabucan is characterized by significant changes in ceramics. Balanza and Lucha Incised groups are considerably less visible. Langostine Red takes the place of Xoclan Trickle-on-red, and Flamboyant Variety replaces the Aguila Variety of Aguila Orange in importance. New polychromes of significance include the Dzaptun Variety of Saxche Orange Polychrome and the Fulano Variety of Yaloche Cream Polychrome. Along these lines, the interiors rather than exteriors of polychrome plates are more commonly painted (Ball 1974: 115; 1977: 132). Decorative techniques

become more prominent and varied: "Fluting, gouge-incising, plano-relief carving, and appliqué-modeling appear, supplementing the simple sharp-incising and appliquéing that characterized the third to fifth century span" (Ball 1974: 132).

One of the most interesting introductions during Sabucan is the slab-footed cylinder tripod and the apron lid, most commonly found in the brown Pucte group. Both Adams and Ball submit that a Teotihuacan presence or contact could be responsible for this new form (Adams 1977: 88; Ball 1974: 115, 1977: 131). Ball substantiates this suggestion with additional evidence: "A hollow, terracotta statuette and 10 solid figurines associated in a single cache with one of the Sabucan phase tripod cylinders are almost certainly of Teotihuacan origin . . ." (1974: 115). Hints of Teotihuacan influence, then, appear for the Sabucan, as they do for Tzakol in north-central Petén. This development will be discussed further in association with the other aspects of the Early Classic at Becán.

Lithics

As held true for the Preclassic, the lithic evidence for the Early Classic roughly coincides with and substantiates the ceramic evidence, especially in terms of indications of Teotihuacan influence. Stoltman notes the Chacsik phase shows an abundance of obsidian blades in the lithic assemblage, the most of any other phase (Stoltman 1978: 19). Moreover, it seems the Chacsik is the only phase during which green obsidian is found: "A new tool type appearing for the first time in the Río Bec region is represented by four

bifacial projectile points made not of local chert but of green obsidian" (Rovner 1974: 129).

That these points were found in relation to the defensive fortification, and green obsidian blades were found with the same cache that held Teotihuacan-type ceramics, helps justify the suggestion that Becán was under some type of distinct Teotihuacan influence during the Early Classic, and as early as the Chacsik phase. Additional lithic evidence for such influence during the Chacsik phase includes a bifacial point and another biface fragment, both of which are diagnostic of the Miccaotli phase, ending around A.D. 250, at Teotihuacan.

The ceramic and lithic evidence diverges somewhat in the Sabucan phase. As was true for ceramics, the lithics from the Sabucan mark a period of innovation in technology at Becán. Celts are replaced as the major tool type primarily by chert percussion blades and unifacially retouched blades and flakes, manipulated into gravers, beaks, and twist drills of unclear function or origin. These new types show up in some contexts of similar date at both Tikal and Uaxactun, suggesting a possible "region-wide response to the previous Teotihuacan domination (Rovner 1974: 129).

Curiously, green obsidian is absent from the record for the Sabucan phase, and no other obvious Teotihuacan lithic types are represented. This absence is in contrast to the ceramic evidence where the majority of Teotihuacan characteristics appear from this complex, but the discrepancy could find reason in confusion about the chronological sequence rather than the evidence. For example, Rovner's green obsidian was found in

the same cache context as Ball's Sabucan phase Teotihuacan tripod cylinder vessels (Rovner 1974: 129; Ball 1974: 115). Only confirmation by the authors can help solve this particular dilemma. What seems definite is that Teotihuacan influence both emerged and declined during the Early Classic. In terms of the lithic evidence the details regarding the nature of Becán's relationship with both Teotihuacan and north-central Petén during this period remain intriguing and unclear.

Architectural and Settlement Evidence

Evidence shows that the defensive earthworks surrounding Becán were built and in use by the beginning of the Early Classic Chacsik phase, and continued to be maintained until the Late Classic Bejuco phase. The fortifications are made up of a ditch, ranging from 12 to 27 meters in width and 1.2 to 5.7 meters in depth; a parapet, about ten meters wide and between 1 and 3.6 meters high, and seven causeways leading to the northwestern and southeastern parts of the site (Webster 1976: 14-15).

The supposition that the maintenance of a defensive system occurred coevally with a Teotihuacan influence at Becán necessarily raises questions concerning the identity of the builders and the motivation for its construction. Webster proposes several options in this regard:

- (1) The site was fortified as an outpost of the Peten-Maya-Teotihuacan sphere of influence.
- (2) The site was fortified by a local Maya group which was resisting the Peten-Maya-Teotihuacan expansion.
- (3) The fortification of Becan had nothing to do with highland influences but rather was necessitated by Maya socio-political development alone (Webster 1976: 105).

The evidence is as yet not sufficient to definitively argue that any of these options comes closer to the truth than another. What does seem obvious is that the inhabitants of Becán, at the beginning of the Early Classic, were engaged in warfare of a sort, as justified by both the defensive earthworks and the introduction of points and blades in the Chacsik phase.

Unfortunately, few other remains of substantial construction survive for the Chacsik, either in the ceremonial center or the periphery; surprisingly fewer than for the preceding Pakluum phase. Adams interprets this as representing a developmental hiatus for the Río Bec region, similar to that experienced at Tikal for this period. However, data from settlement studies based on ceramic concentrations indicate an increase in population and an intensification of settlement both within and beyond the limits of the fortified enclosure (Thomas 1981a: 98).

Thomas's evaluation of settlement differs greatly from what was previously supposed. Most people working in the region believed Chacsik material was restricted to the core of Becán, inside the fortification. Eaton, for example, said that Chacsik material was absent altogether at Chicanná (1974: 137). Further investigation throughout the region will certainly reveal more about this crucial yet little-known phase in the Río Bec region's prehistory.

There survives slightly more evidence of construction for the Sabucan phase than for its predecessor, though even this is rather scant. Structure XIV, housing the cache of Teotihuacan style artifacts, is the only significant example of standing architecture

assigned to this period by the Tulane group. Adams supplements the Teotihuacan connection, suggesting that the structure itself may have exhibited a talud-tablero-type construction, a diagnostic feature of Teotihuacan architecture (1977: 88).

As will be explained more extensively in Chapter 4, increasing amounts of evidence point to the beginnings of the Río Bec architectural style emerging during this Early Classic Sabucan phase. Paul Gendrop has analyzed the monumental architecture of the Río Bec region, and believes construction of many of Becán's structures began by A.D. 570-630 (Gendrop 1987: 44).

Several significant developments beyond the ceremonial center most likely occurred during the Sabucan phase. Population appears consistent with the Chacsik phase, and again, relatively little actual construction information has been recovered. However, a possible abandonment of plazuela groups and a shift to the occupation of isolated residences is demonstrated by settlement studies. Thomas suggests: "Such a trend may reflect the incursion of some new group, or it simply may be a result of population expansion" (1981a: 100). In all, the evidence for this period is overwhelmingly inconclusive in regard to such questions: further study is desperately needed.

Other possible major developments that would indicate a movement toward increasing specialization and complexity at Becán during this phase include the beginnings of agricultural terracing and activities leading to the production of chert mounds. Dating of these types of remains does prove highly uncertain, however

(Thomas 1981a: 99; Turner 1983: 96), though it is certain that terraces and chert mounds represent predominant features on the landscape by the Late Classic. I will therefore discuss them in more detail in relation to that period.

LATE CLASSIC

Ceramic Sequence

The Bejuco ceramic complex (A.D. 630 to A.D. 730) represents a shift toward more intense regionalization, paired with the sharing of some affinities with the Chenes region, northern Belize, and southern Quintana Roo, in addition to north-central Petén. Various varieties of Chimbote group fine ware, for example, are virtually identical for both Río Bec and Chenes at this time, suggesting participation of both in a wider interaction sphere (Ball 1977: 160). Elements seen in the collections of both Becán and areas of northern Belize and southern Quintana Roo include "a red-and-black-on-orange polychrome which may feature abstract, figure-painted, and-or glyphic designs . . . [and a] red-and-black-on-cream, ring-based plate form" (Ball 1974: 115). Petén influence is still evident in the form of Petén Gloss Ware, but, on the whole is less abundant or frequent than before. The presence in the Río Bec region of various trade wares from the Petén, southern Quintana Roo, northern Belize, and perhaps the northern Campeche coast indicates an expanding sphere of trade throughout the Maya lowlands at this time.

Other general characteristics of the Bejuco complex come in the form of common, round-sided, flat-based dishes and plates, and bowls with flat bottoms and outsloping

sides. Encanto Striated and brown Becanchen group jars, basins, and dishes appear to evolve directly from Sabucan groups and forms (Ball 1977: 133). The highly varied decoration prevalent in the Sabucan complex proves less frequent for Bejuco, with only channeling and appliqué modeling persisting. Finally, "two-piece anthropomorphic and zoomorphic cache vessels also appear during this phase as dedicatory offerings" (Ball 1974: 115). So, while Bejuco saw the introduction of many new forms from areas throughout the lowlands, it was also continuing a tradition of regional development for its ceramics. This trend is disrupted in the following complex.

The Chintok complex (A.D. 730 to A.D. 830) begins in the Late Classic, but spans into the Terminal Classic, thereby typifying the beginning of a decline in sophistication in ceramics. The only existing polychrome example is a probable import from the Petén. Decoration is primarily limited to herringbone-patterning and simple geometric designs; and slips tend to be dull and flaky. Innovations include a new water storage variety, the replacement of Becanchen Brown by brown Traino, Tanachacal Slate basins, Pixtun Trickle-on-gray jars, the sharp-angle inverted rim, and a hemispheric bowl type. The two-piece cache type carries over from the Bejuco phase, and is perhaps the only type to show improvement. While the Chintok complex is probably one of the poorest represented ceramically, Ball claims the evidence seems plentiful enough to illustrate a general decrease of refinement and quality (1974: 116; 1977: 134).

Lithics

With the Late Classic period comes the first major discrepancy between the ceramic component and the lithic component of the Becán archaeological record. While most of the Bejuco phase artifacts of stone and ceramic complement each other, those of the Chintok are rather divergent in their implications. Many characteristics of the lithics of the Bejuco phase are equally or more prevalent in the Chintok; this contrasts with the ceramic evidence that indicates a decline in the sophistication of products. For example, a dome-shaped tool of local chert, probably used for plastering, originates in the Bejuco and survives into the Chintok phase. While the Sabucan chert blades are no longer used in Bejuco, many Early Classic characteristics persist, as do a variable degree of warfare-oriented tool types: biface lanceolate projectile points in Bejuco and square-based and shouldered bifacial projectile points in Chintok. In fact, beginning with the Chintok phase and continuing through the Xcocom phase, bifaces become much more prevalent in the Becan assemblage (Rovner 1974: 129-130; Stoltman 1978: 24).

Architectural and Settlement Evidence

The most outstanding aspects of Río Bec architecture developed during the Late Classic, and especially in the Bejuco phase. This is the time that the specific architectural style that distinguishes the Río Bec region emerged. Because Late Classic architecture represents the majority of the standing architecture in the region, it has been subject to

significant amount of study in its own right. For that reason, I have dedicated Chapter 4 to a more exhaustive discussion of this well-documented subject. The most significant aspect of the Bejuco phase architecturally is the seeming construction explosion that occurred throughout the Río Bec region, both within and outside the ceremonial centers (Ball 1977; Potter 1977; Thomas 1981a). Additionally, as with the Bejuco ceramics, certain architectural features are shared between Río Bec, Chenes, and some sites in southern Quintana Roo at this time (Gendrop 1987: 17)

Settlement studies and studies of agricultural remains point to an astounding growth in population and an unprecedented intensification in agricultural practice, both consistent with developments in the rest of the Maya lowlands. Adams estimates, based on settlement studies done by Thomas and Turner, that by Bejuco times, the population of the 10,000 square kilometers surrounding Becán had reached between 4.5 and 6.9 million (1981b: 245). Indicating further evidence for the density of settlement at the time, Thomas relates that "over 75 percent of all house-mounds in the survey show evidence of Bejuco activity . . . the vast majority of houses in the sustaining area of Becan were either constructed or occupied during this time" (1981b: 610). The trend established during Sabucan, of moving into isolated residences, continued to an extent in Bejuco. However, because of the density of settlement, plazuela construction and occupation was revived at the beginning of the Late Classic, though isolated residences seem to have been preferred (Thomas 1981a: 101).

As was true for much of the Maya lowlands by the Late Classic period, the boom

in population was accompanied by innovations in agricultural intensification. These innovations included systems of artificial terracing and raised fields. Remains of the former are predominant on the landscape, found throughout the hilly uplands of the region, typically found in conjunction with farmstead complexes that occupied the tops of the hills. The Bajo de Morocoy, located on the eastern edge of the region in Quintana Roo, represents the best known evidence that Río Bec peoples exploited low bajo land using raised field technology as well (Adams 1981b: 243-246). This use of all available land for agriculture further indicates a perceived need to support a growing, complex community that probably relied on agricultural surplus for trade and in times of drought.

Unfortunately, while certain conclusions may be reached about the construction and extent of the terraces and raised fields, little has been deduced in terms of types of crops grown, whether crops were grown for surplus to trade or simply in response to a growing population, and how this new agricultural technology and production might reflect levels of social and political structure within the Río Bec region (Turner 1983: 121). Presumably, as more focused investigations are made of these structures, including palaeobotanical studies, in addition to more advanced studies of the region in general, such questions may begin to be answered.

Chert mounds also were identified during settlement investigations, and seem to have been most prolific during the Bejuco phase. One hundred fifty-five chert mounds were recorded as part of the settlement survey, none of which occurred within the civic-ceremonial center. Based on the types of artifacts comprising these mounds, Thompson

suggests these mounds represent sites of celt production. Those involved in the flaked celt industry would collect and pile a store of chert nodules and others would be responsible for producing the celts. The extent to which such tools were traded outside the region is unclear as is the possible function of the large tools (Thompson 1991: 145, 151-152).

Many of the new trends set in the Bejuco phase in architecture, settlement and agriculture changed or began to deteriorate during the subsequent Chintok phase. While massive, large-scale religious, civic, and domestic construction continued at a rate equal to that of Bejuco in the centers, construction throughout the settlement area shows a marked decline for the phase. Only 27.7 percent of house mounds were occupied during this phase, little more than a third of that occupied in Bejuco. The abandonment of Bejuco houses and a return to favoring plazuela groups appears characteristic of the phase as well. Though construction is sparse outside the centers, the remains that do survive from the period suggest more sophistication and attention to detail (Thomas 1981a: 102).

As settlement evidence shows, the population during the Chintok phase was in decline. This suggestion is substantiated by the cessation of the use of chert mounds and of the construction of agricultural terraces at this time. These features tend to support the ceramic evidence that the civilization was in decline by the end of the Late Classic period. However, continuance of construction zeal in the center paired with a greater concentration of settlement near the center, provide a perplexing paradox to that

suggestion (Thomas 1981a: 103; Turner 1983: 113). Again, only more evidence in all of the areas of study can help solve this question.

TERMINAL CLASSIC AND POSTCLASSIC

Ceramic Sequence

The beginning of the Terminal Classic is represented by the late facet Chintok phase; however, the majority of the Terminal Classic and the Early Postclassic are marked by the entirety of the Xcocom ceramic complex, said to last from A.D. 830 to A.D. 1050. Some important groups in the Xcocom complex are gouge-incised and appliquéd-modeled types in the black Achote group, monochrome red wares, Pixtun Trickle-on-gray jars, and Jalapeño Scored bowls (Ball 1977: 135-6).

Xcocom, however, is most prominently characterized by an overwhelming influx of new ceramic groups, types and features at its beginning, including, among many others: a few fine orange ware groups, a thin slate ware group, basal-break tripod plates, rounded-side bowls, incurved-rim tripod grater bowls, gouge-incising, gadrooning, and simple incision (Ball 1974: 116; 1977: 135). Late facet Xcocom, corresponding roughly with the Early Postclassic and beginning around A.D. 950, witnesses replacement of most features with a black-on-white slipped type and Tohil Plumbate, accompanied by an overall decline in the ceramic record by this point. These major changes have been explained by a possible influx of peoples from northern Yucatán during this phase (Ball 1977: 135).

By the Late Postclassic (A.D. 1200 to A.D. 1450), assigned by Ball to an incomplete Lobo complex, the limited Becán ceramic evidence is almost exclusively in the form of Mayapan-type censers: non-ritual ceramics apparently were not found in the Late Postclassic (Ball 1974: 130; 1977: 136).

Lithics

The Terminal Classic lithic assemblage is marked by the introduction of a new bifacial projectile point, identical to a point type found at Uxmal in the northern part of the Yucatán Peninsula. The Early Postclassic also sees the introduction of large flaked bifaces known as 'ceremonial knives', most commonly known from Chichén Itzá, another large site in the north. These two introductions corroborate a view of a northern Yucatán orientation, perhaps an actual presence of groups of Yucatecan immigrants from the Puuc region, for the Xcocom phase. Rovner also suggests that the presence of these new types and the evidence of fire in Structure IV at Becán during this period, indicate "the Maya Classic must have met a violent end at Becan" (1974: 130).

Other lithic features of the Early Postclassic include notched points, polished celts, single and multiple denticulate retouched flakes, and the presence of basalt metates. Many of these forms had not been used since the Preclassic period. This anomaly is one that finds evidence in the Late Postclassic as well, a period for which there is little other lithic information available, and sees the eventual abandonment of Becán (Rovner 1974: 130).

Architectural and Settlement Evidence

The Xcocom phase represents the sharp decline at Becán, and presumably the Río Bec region in general, of many of the markers of complex society. Major construction throughout the site and its hinterlands ceased, with midden accumulation occurring within some of the major structures of the ceremonial center. According to settlement studies, occupation was limited to a few residences near the center. Scattered plazuela groups outside the site saw considerably less concentrated habitation. So, although it remains possible that there was a migration of people from the north during the Xcocom phase, it would have been a movement made up of a rather small, elite population that lived near or within the center. By the Late Postclassic Lobo phase, occupation and population appear so heavily in decline, that even this scant representation of groups from the north had disappeared (Thomas 1981a: 103-104; 1981b: 611).

SUMMARY

According to the available and somewhat limited evidence, people probably moved into and settled in the Río Bec region as early as 600 B.C., at the beginning of the Middle Preclassic. From the ceramics that survive from that period, it appears they had moved northward from the Petén region, bringing the knowledge of the technological traditions of that area with them. Likely practicing some level of swidden agriculture, they established small farming hamlets in the form of plazuela groups across the

TABLE 1
 CHRONOLOGY OF THE RIO BEC REGION

MAJOR PERIODS		RIO BEC CERAMIC PHASE
POSTCLASSIC	1400	
	1300	LOBO
	1200	
	1100	
	1000	
TERMINAL CLASSIC	900	
LATE CLASSIC	800	CHINTOK
	700	BEJUCO
	600	SABUCAN
EARLY CLASSIC	500	CHACSIK
	400	
	300	
	200	
PROTOCLASSIC	100	PAKLUM
LATE PRECLASSIC	A.D.	
	0	
	B.C.	
MIDDLE PRECLASSIC	100	
	200	
	300	ACACHEN
	400	
	500	
	600	

landscape.

While retaining contact with the Petén, the people of the region also had begun to develop their own sense of regionality by the Late Preclassic, as is evident from their ceramics. It seems apparent that by the Late Preclassic they were also widening their range of contact as far as central Mexico (though perhaps through a Petén route). Due to the location of the region, it must have become a rather strategic trading thoroughfare for goods passing over the Yucatán Peninsula.

By the beginning of the Early Classic, the communities had to a certain extent coalesced in the face of some common outside threat. They built a large system of defensive earthworks around what is now known as the site of Becán, and settlement became denser within and around this center. The defensive system not only indicates a perception of a threat, but also suggests the emergence of some central authority capable of organizing a large labor force for its construction.

Certainly by the time the Early Classic period was fully realized most of the qualities of cultural complexity that reigned in the Río Bec region were in place. Large-scale population growth and settlement density, an emphasis on the building of monumental architecture, craft specialization, the beginnings of agricultural intensification, and hierarchical sociopolitical organization were all at some stage of development during the Early Classic. Influence from Petén persisted, and a Teotihuacan presence is evident in the material record, though the nature of this presence remains elusive. Becán's occupants continued to maintain the defensive system through most of

the period, while beginning a program of monumental construction within its limits. Population and settlement density kept rising, calling for the creation of new mechanisms of organization of people and products.

The culmination of the trend toward growth and complexity appears to have happened during the Bejuco phase of the Late Classic period. It was during this time that the architectural style that had its beginnings in the Early Classic was perfected in all its sophistication, that centers displaying this style were built throughout the region, and that agricultural technology was employed to construct systems of terraces and raised fields. Trade seems to have reached its zenith at this stage as well, with numerous ceramic types from different areas represented in the collections, while regional styles continued to be developed and adapted. It appears that the Late Classic signified an era of great autonomy, unity, and power within the social, political, and cultural spheres dominating the region. With Becán as its capital, the Río Bec region had developed into a delicately balanced, complex, and integrated system.

By the end of the eighth century, the centrality and strength of the region began to wane, as was true for many areas of the Maya lowlands around that time. Monumental construction declined, and the population diminished. Within the following couple of centuries the centers were abandoned, with the exception of what appears to have been the temporary occupation of some of them by elite groups from northern Yucatán.

The story is similar to that of many of the regions within the Maya lowlands, primarily due to a paucity of details. The Late Classic provides the most in terms of

pointed evidence, but, for the most part, the impetus and nature of the crucial points of major changes within the societal, cultural, and political environment prove difficult to ascertain from the current investigations. Much more intensive and extensive excavation and settlement studies are vital to uncovering the mysteries of the origins of the people who first settled the region; with whom they kept in contact; the nature and implications of that contact; how they evolved into a highly complex, autonomous society; and why that level of balance degenerated. Only when a program of investigation that focuses on the people's relation to their environment, the relations of the settlement area with the centers, the interaction of the centers with each other and the region itself with other regions, will more definite answers begin to emerge. Fortunately, the present corpus of published data lays a reasonable and respectable foundation for such further study.

CHAPTER 4

LATE CLASSIC RIO BEC ARCHITECTURE

INTRODUCTION

The Río Bec region benefits from an especially good state of preservation for much of its monumental architecture. As a result, it has been the subject of numerous explorative and reconnaissance missions, the results of which can be found in the form of substantial architectural reports. These reports have spurred a rather rigorous study of the Río Bec style through the examination of extensive standing architecture. Fortunately, it can be supposed that most of the architecture is of the Late Classic period, as it seems this was the last time of intense construction for the Río Bec region, at least as far as the ceramics from Becán illustrate. As a result, there is a rather large corpus of information that speaks to the Late Classic Río Bec architectural style.

The most complete works on the subject include those of Raymond Merwin and Clarence Hay (Hay 1935; Merwin 1913), Karl Ruppert and John H. Denison, Jr. (1943), David F. Potter (1977), and George F. Andrews (1988). Andrews has yet to publish a concise volume of his field notes for Río Bec, but has organized his notes into three bound volumes that express his approach to the study, and are close to the form that a publishable volume will follow (which I am told will be shortly). I have had the good

fortune to be granted access to these three volumes, and they have proven invaluable to this present study.

Others have contributed significantly to the study through smaller reports. Maurice de Perigny was the first to observe a Río Bec style tower in the region (1907; 1908; 1909), Jack Eaton excavated and reported on Chicanná (1972; 1974), and Paul Gendrop has published analyses concerning form and function of various Río Bec architectural features (1980; 1983; 1985a; 1985b; 1987). Additionally, various projects carried out through the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (I.N.A.H.), beginning in 1983, and the Proyecto Arqueológico Frontera Sur of I.N.A.H., established in 1984, have concentrated primarily on excavation and consolidation of known and unknown sites, adding obvious crucial data to aid in the understanding of the region's archaeology in general, and of the architecture more specifically. Unfortunately, much of this data has not been made available in widely published form. Once the information becomes more accessible, it is sure to help shed light on the many critical questions associated with Late Classic Río Bec architecture.

From the data that do survive in published form, it is possible to explore some important questions concerning the Río Bec region in the Late Classic. An established set of identifiable features that characterizes Late Classic Río Bec architecture will be discussed, as will some of the seeming anomalies that exist in the architecture of the region. This set of features naturally facilitates considerations of function and organization of individual structures and sites, which, in turn, provide insight into the

Late Classic political and social organization (at least at the elite level) of the region.

Finally, these aspects of Río Bec architectural style and organization of centers clearly set the region apart from its neighbors in the Maya lowlands. Further comparative analysis of this region with those of Petén, Chenes, and southern Quintana Roo, especially in terms of origins and influence of styles, should begin to reveal to what degree the Río Bec region followed a path of evolution independent of other regions in the lowlands, and what that level of independence reflects about the region's internal integration and autonomy.

FEATURES OF LATE CLASSIC RIO BEC ARCHITECTURE

Both Potter and G. Andrews have produced exhaustive catalogues and analyses of what they consider important Río Bec architectural features. They have presented their analyses in different manners, but both prove useful. I will model the present analysis after a combination of what I consider the most effective aspects of each. For example, Potter (1977) provides a tabulation of certain 'Río Bec' features in order to show their relative importance in the region. I will include a table as well (Table 2), to satisfy the dual function of illustrating at which sites and how often certain exterior decorative features have been reported. I also have summarized basic diagnostic features of Late Classic Río Bec architecture in a fashion following more closely that of G. Andrews, in which the style is discussed in terms of architectural, construction, and decorative features (G. Andrews 1988).

TABLE 2
SOME DIAGNOSTIC RIO BEC STYLE FEATURES

SITES	BASE MOLDINGS		LOWER WALL ZONE				
	grps of 3 columns	stepped frets	grps of 3 columns	check/ cross panels	mask panels	corner masks	zoomorphic dwys
Becan	IV			I,II,IV,V-a	I,IV,X		IV,X
Buenos Aires					I		
Carmelita							
Ceibarico							
Channa							
Chicanná	III		III,VI	I	I,VI,X,XX	II,XX	II,XX
Corriental			II				I
Culucbalom	I				IV,V		
Desprecio							
Halaltun							
Hormiguero					II,E-I	II,V	II,V,VI
El Coyote (Km167)							
El Toro (Km 183)							
Manos Rojas							
Namac							
Noche Buena							
Noh- Sayab							
Okolhuitz				II			
Pasion del Cristo							
Payan					I		I
Pechal	VI		IX,XI			I,V,X	I,V,X
Peor es Nada							
Porvenir			II		I,II		
Puch				I	I		
Puerto Rico							
Pueblo Viejo				AI			
Ramonal	AII,BI,CI		BI	AI	AI,BI		
Río Bec A							
" " B	I		II	I			
" " C	I		I				
" " D	I						
" " E							
" " F							
" " G							
" " H							
" " J							
" " K							
" " L							
" " M							
" " N				I			
" " I	I				XI,XVII		
" " II	I					XVII	XI,XVII
" " III	I				I?		
" " IV	I						
" " V	I						
" " VI							
" " VII							
" " VIII							
Tortuga							
Uaacbal							
Xaxbil	I	I	I				
Xpuhil					(I),IV(IV),I,(V)		(I)
Xuts			I				
Zoh Laguna					I		

*Roman numerals refer to structures, letters to groups within sites (except when part of "Río Bec" site names).

SITES	UPPER WALL ZONES			ROOFCOMBS		TOWERS	
	frontal masks	recessed panels	human figures	frontal masks	human figures	typical	atypical
Becan							I,III,IV,VIII
Buenos Aires				I			
Carmelita							
Ceibarico				BI		AI	
Channa							
Chicanná	XX					I	
Corriental						I	
Culucbalom				I	I		
Desprecio							
Halaltun							
Horniguero	II		V			I,II	V,VI
El Coyote (Km 167)							
El Toro (Km 183)							
Manos Rojas							AI,CI
Namac							
Noche Buena							
Noh- Sayab						I	
Okolhuitz					I	II	
Pasion del Cristo							
Payan	I						I
Pechal	I?						
Peor es Nada						I,III, V	
Porvenir							I
Puch							
Puerto Rico							
Pueblo Viejo					AI	III	
Ramonal							
Río Bec A							I
" " B				I	I	I	
" " C							
" " D							
" " E							
" " F							
" " G							
" " H							
" " J							
" " K							
" " L							I
" " M						I	
" " N						XI	
" " I						I	
" " II							
" " III							
" " IV							
" " V							
" " VI							
" " VII							
" " VIII							
Tortuga							
Uaacbal			I		I		
Xaxbil							
Xpuhil						(I)I	
Xuts							
Zoh Laguna						I	

Exterior Features

Most structures in the Río Bec region are rather simple, multi-chambered buildings, as opposed to the temple-pyramids that dominate so many other regions of the Maya lowlands. While pyramids do exist, they are very few, and could not be seen as characteristic forms of the building style. Additionally, only a small number of ballcourts have been identified in the region. Thus, all the features discussed relate only to the multi-chambered buildings, typically of one or two levels, that are the primary building type in the region. While there are some variations in building type, it proves worthwhile to first describe the most elemental building form. By doing so, additional components may be described for buildings of increasing complexity and uniqueness.

Most buildings are of one or two levels, and house between one and four rooms, though some structures are more palace-like, containing much larger numbers of rooms. Each level typically is divided into five horizontal sections. From bottom to top these sections are: the base molding, the lower wall zone, the medial molding, the upper wall zone, and the cornice molding (fig. 2).

Also, many buildings reveal a vertical division of the building facade into three even units, "with each unit simulating a separate building" (Potter 1977: 77). This image is typically achieved by vertical recesses and a change of planes between adjacent units (G. Andrews 1988) (fig. 3). Often, this division into three parts accompanies the presence of a large zoomorphic mask surrounding the central doorway of the building

Fig. 2 Río Bec D, Str. I (restored) north facade (G. Andrews 1988).

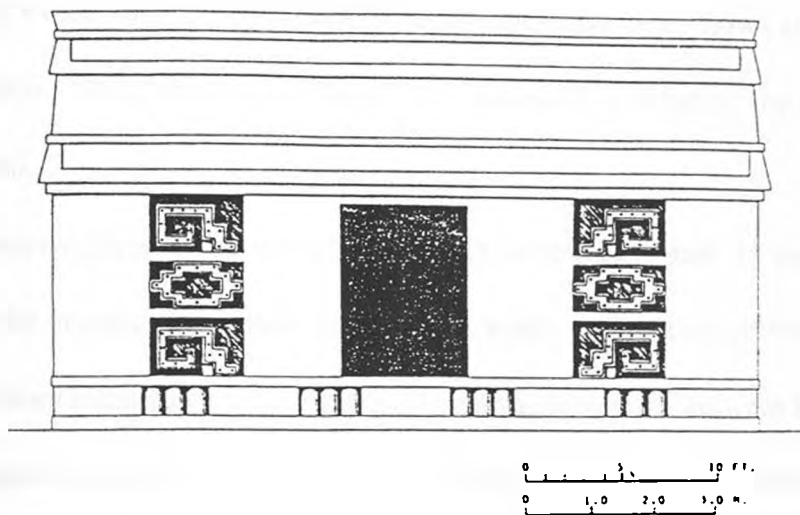
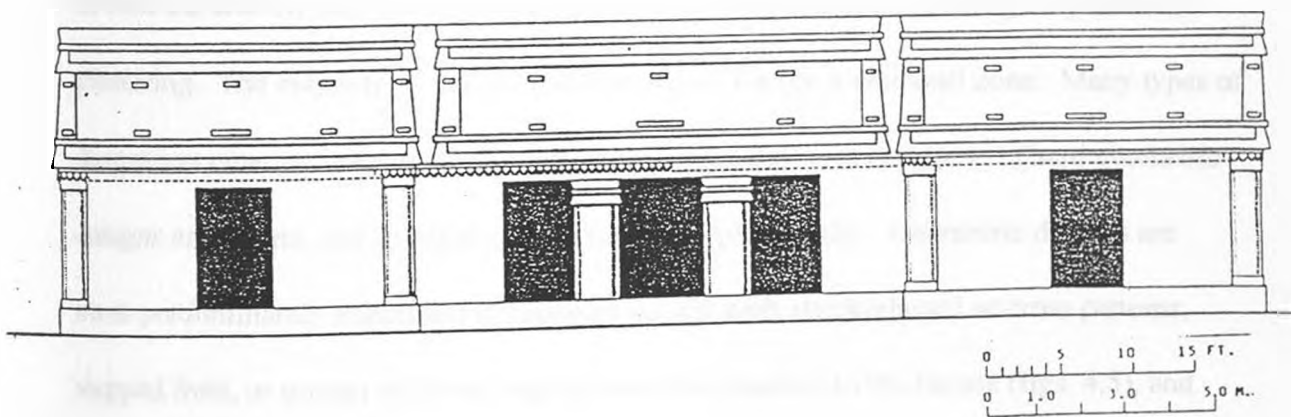


Fig. 3 Channa, Str. I (restored) north facade (G. Andrews 1988).



(Potter 1977: 77). These masks will be dealt with more specifically below. While the entire building would have been painted, generally only the front shows evidence of added decoration. Thus, wherever decoration is described, it refers to the facade unless otherwise noted.

The base moldings of most buildings range between .60 and .75 meters in height, making them the highest of the three moldings. Usually constructed of three members, the top and bottom members are both made of a single course of well-cut blocks, while the central member is of two courses, also of well-cut blocks. If decoration occurs in the base molding, it is found on the central member, most often in the form of sets of three flattened colonnettes applied so that they alternate with the plain space (fig. 2). Step-like decorations or other decorative motifs occur very occasionally as well in the base moldings (figs. 5,11), but these are not typical (G. Andrews 1988; Potter 1977: 78).

The lower wall zone of buildings, where the doorways are found, are constructed of well-cut and dressed small blocks arranged in even courses, requiring only minimal plastering. The majority of decoration is reserved for the lower wall zone. Many types of decoration emerge, but can be divided into two general stylistic types: 1) hard geometric designs and forms, and 2) highly stylized zoomorphic masks. Geometric designs are most predominantly expressed in recessed panels with checkerboard or cross patterns, stepped frets, or groups of three long colonnettes attached to the facade (figs. 4,5), and more rarely, found at the corners (fig. 3). Zoomorphic mask sculptures come in the forms of large, 'monster masks' that surround the central doorway, recessed panels containing

Fig. 4 Becán, Str. II- details of checkerboard and cross panels (G. Andrews 1988).

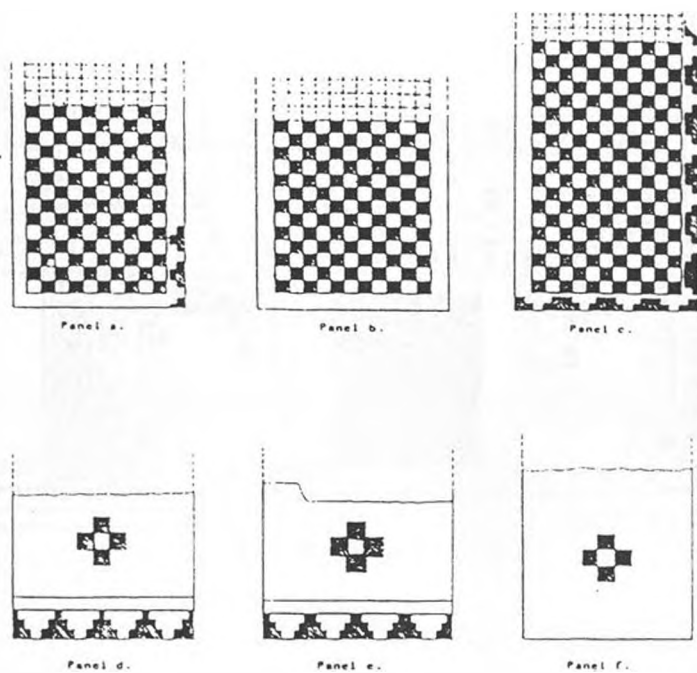


Fig. 5 Xaxbil, Str. I- a) south elevation, b) west elevation (Ruppert and Denison 1943: figs. 102a,b).

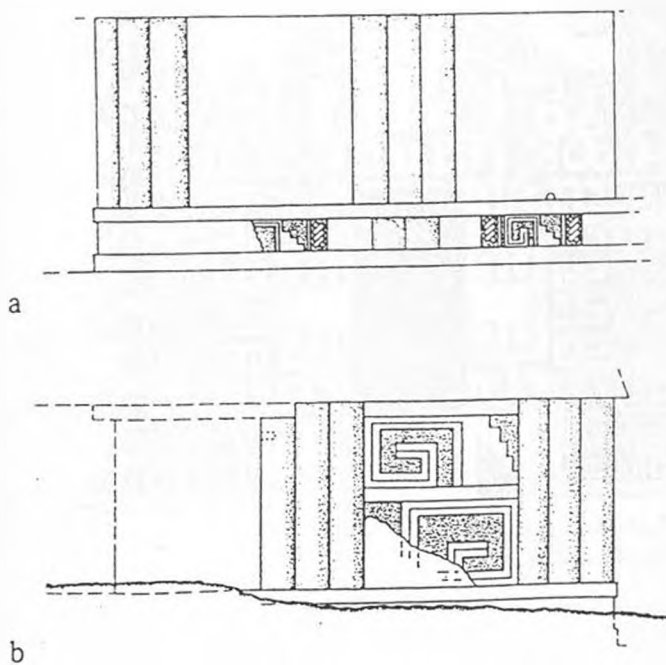


Fig. 6 Chicanná, Str. II- Monster mask doorway (G. Andrews 1988).

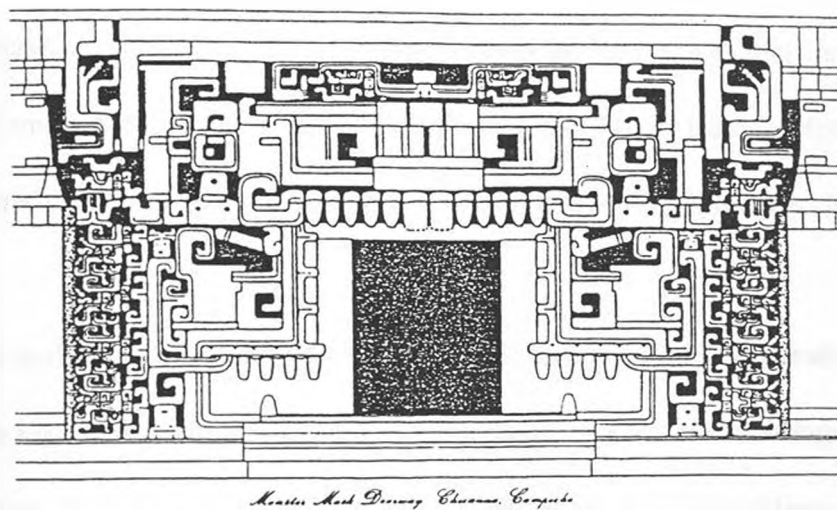
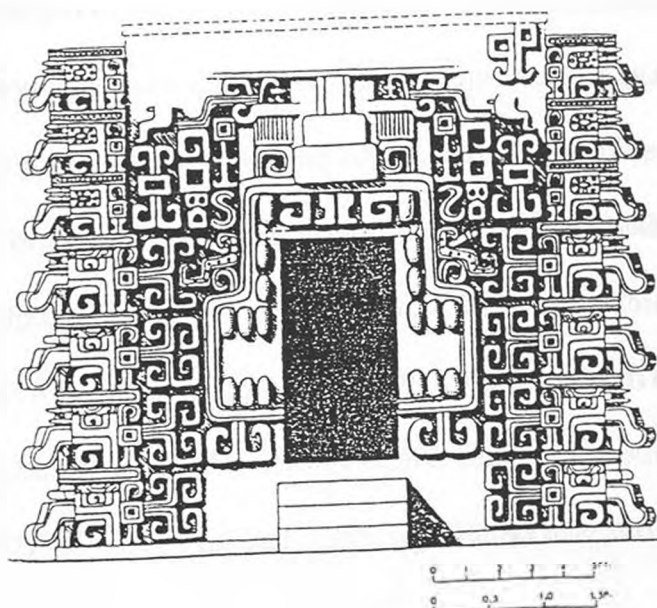


Fig. 7 Hormiguero, Str. V- Detail of north facade masks (G. Andrews 1988).



profile masks, and stacked masks found at the corners of buildings (figs. 6,7). All these decorative features are typically of molded plaster rather than of stone covered in plaster. Exterior doorways are relatively wide, often have wooden lintels, and their jambs are constructed of small blocks. None of the known jambs or lintels carry sculpture. Doorways sometimes do have round columns or square piers (G. Andrews 1988; Potter 1977: 77).

Medial moldings, separating lower and upper wall zones, are generally made up of two or three members that have inward sloping faces. Again, the moldings are constructed of small, well-cut blocks. Decoration is rare on medial moldings, but occasionally occurs in the form of a stucco molding with fluted design just below the medial molding (fig. 3), or more rarely, in the form of applied decoration as is seen in base moldings (G. Andrews 1988; Potter 1977: 78).

Because upper wall zones are subject to fall, there is less evidence available for them in terms of construction and decorative features. From the portions of the upper wall zones that do survive, certain features can be recognized. For example, many of them seem to have an inward slope, and most reveal some forms of decoration. Such decoration takes the form of "large frontal masks, recessed panels with projecting stones to support stucco sculptures, and more rarely, hut-like forms as at Chicanná, Structure II and Puch, Structure I" (G. Andrews 1988) (figs. 8,9). More decorative features may have existed more widely, but, because of lack of evidence, such a suggestion is only conjecture (Potter 1977: 79). As expected, cornice moldings also suffer from

Fig. 8 Payan, Str. I (Ruppert and Denison 1943: fig. 95).

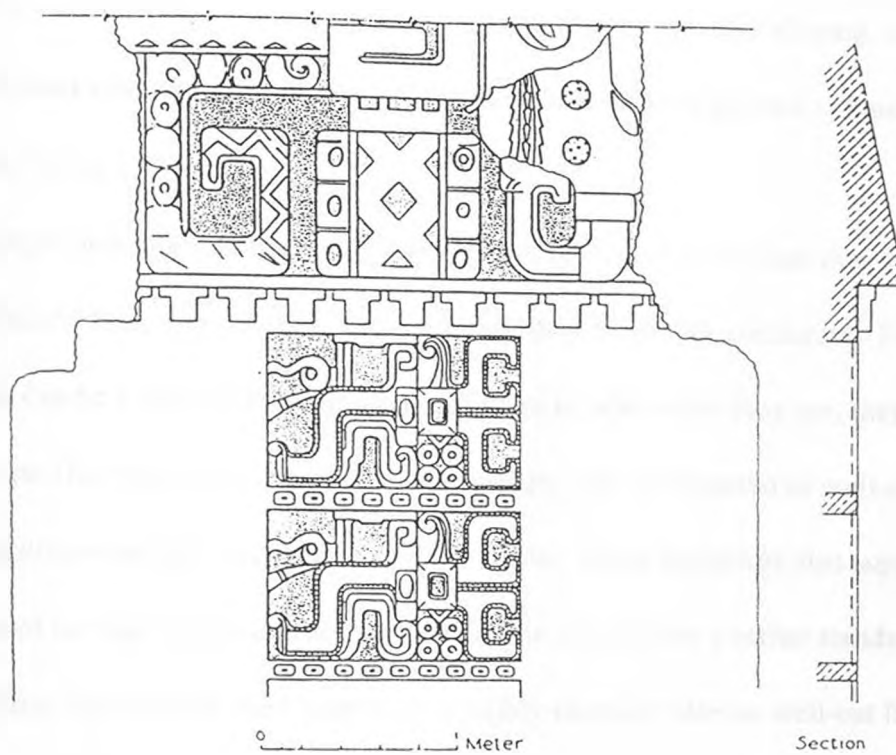
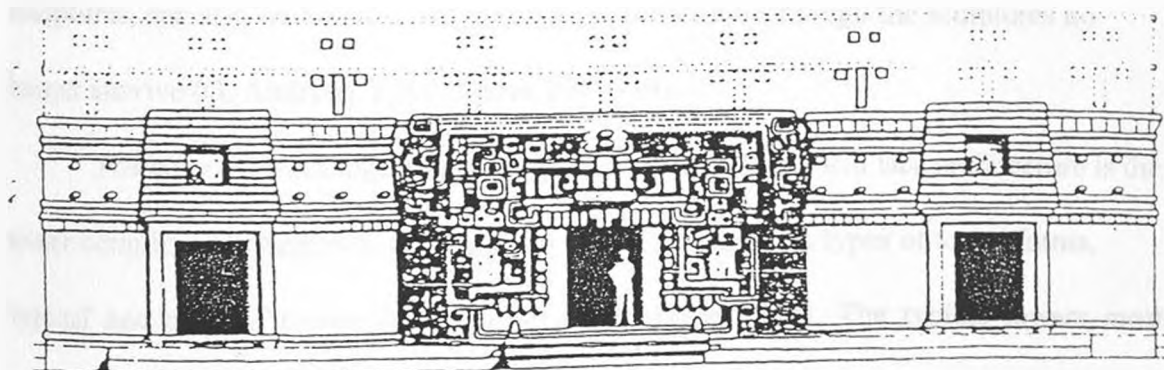


Fig. 9 Chicanná, Str. II- (restored) west facade (Gendrop 1991: fig. 19).



underrepresentation on the buildings of the Río Bec region. However, those that survive are generally of three members, occasionally four with the top member sloping, and the only form of decoration found on them is evidence of having been painted in bands (G. Andrews 1988; Potter 1977: 78).

The simple building form described above is often found in conjunction with a variety of additional building features, but the details generally stay consistent. For example, stairs can be incorporated into the building plan, and when they are, they are typically of a specific style: undecorated, no side ramps, and constructed of well-cut blocks that constitute the full height of individual risers. Many buildings also support or show evidence of having supported roof combs. These also follow a rather standard style, though their construction may vary from roughly-dressed slabs to well-cut facing stones. Roof combs almost always are made up of a single slotted wall (fig. 10), and are often heavily decorated with sculpture of different sorts. From surviving examples, it seems the most popular decorative forms consisted of the stylized frontal zoomorphic masks, and some instances of more realistic depictions of human figures as can be found on Okolhuitz, Structure I (fig. 11). Projecting stones, presumably used to hold stucco sculptures, can also be found on many of these roofcombs, though the sculptures no longer survive (G. Andrews 1988; Potter 1977: 79).

Probably the most significant hallmark of Late Classic Río Bec architecture is the tower complex. G. Andrews and Gendrop have classified two types of tower forms, 'typical' and 'atypical' towers (G. Andrews and Gendrop 1991). The 'typical' towers, most

Fig. 10 Culucbalom, Str. I- (restored) south facade
(Ruppert and Denison 1943: fig. 112a)

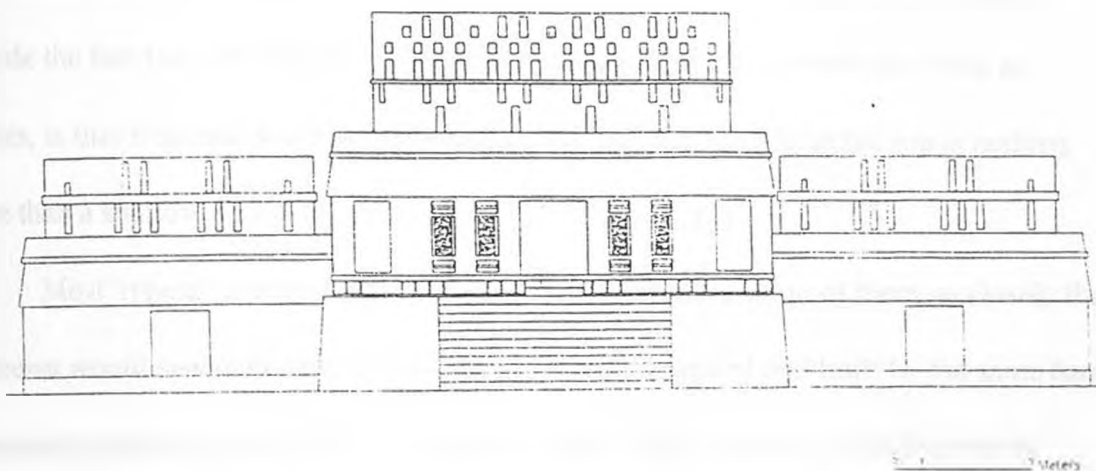
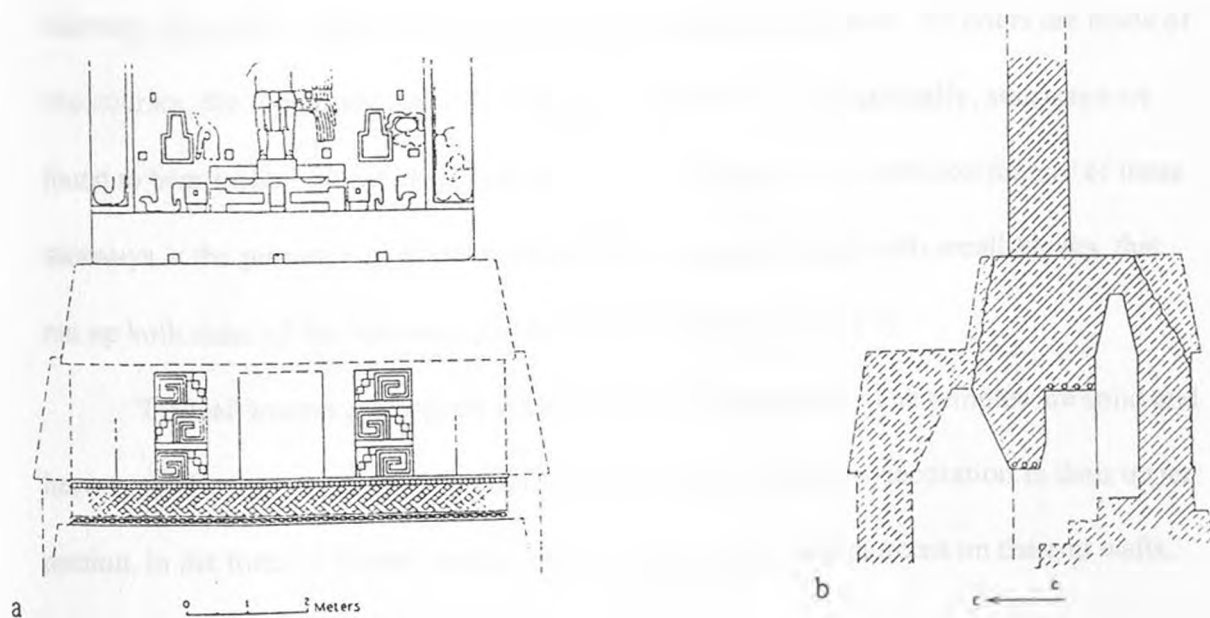


Fig. 11 Okolhuitz, Str. I- a) west elevation, b) section (Ruppert and Denison 1943: figs. 103a,b).

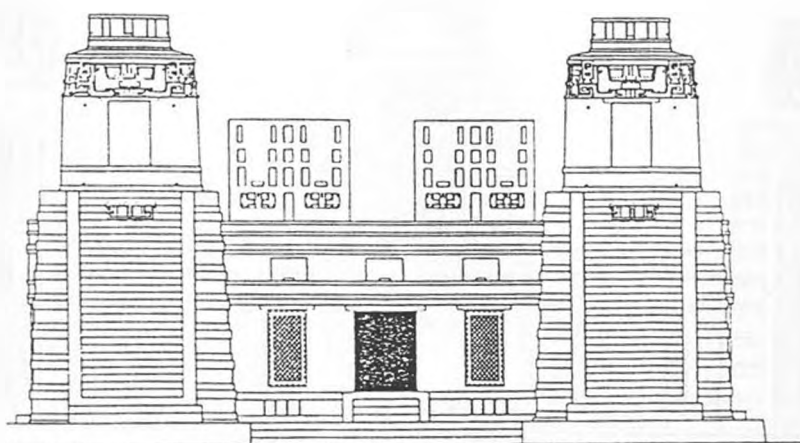


often found in pairs called 'twin towers', are "arranged symmetrically on both sides of the central doorway" (G. Andrews 1988) of typical Río Bec style, range-type buildings. Each tower superficially resembles a temple-pyramid. What makes them different (beside the fact they are attached to range buildings), and what constitutes them as towers, is that their stairways are non-functional, and the 'temple' at the top is nothing more than a shallow recess (G. Andrews 1988) (figs. 12,13).

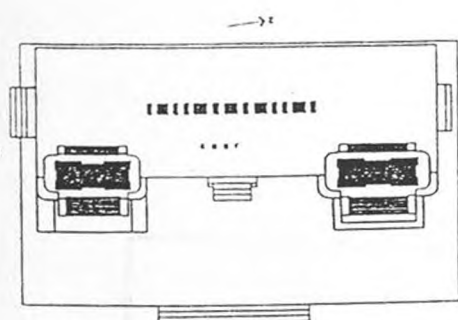
Most 'typical' towers follow the same basic formula, some of them so closely that Andrews would speculate that they could have been designed and built by the same hand (personal communication 1997). The tower form is that of a steep, slightly stepped pyramid. The narrow steps are formed by high horizontal moldings attached at several points along the height of the pyramid, the width of the tower decreasing slightly above each of the moldings with increasing height. As is true for most buildings, the pyramid is faced with well-cut and well-dressed blocks. The corners of the pyramid are rounded. A stairway, too steep to use, rises to the top of the pyramid structure. Its risers are made of two courses, the top course thinner than the one below it. Occasionally, stairways are found to bear frontal masks inset into the risers. A much more common feature of these stairways is the presence of narrow, ramp-like structures, faced with small blocks, that run up both sides of the stairway (G. Andrews 1988) (figs. 12,13).

'Typical' towers are topped with temple-like structures. The temples are solid and have symbolic doorways with wooden lintels. They often carry decoration in their upper portion, in the form of frontal masks on the facades and cross patterns on the end walls.

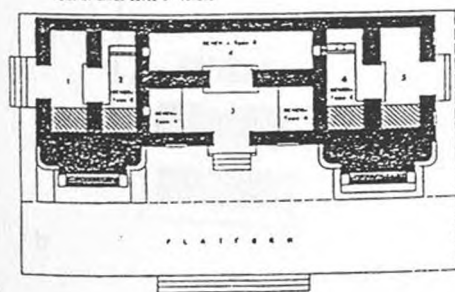
Fig. 12 Río Bec B, Str. I- a) (restored) east facade (G. Andrews 1983),
 b) plans at upper level and main level (G. Andrews 1988),
 c) (restored) south elevation (G. Andrews 1988).



a

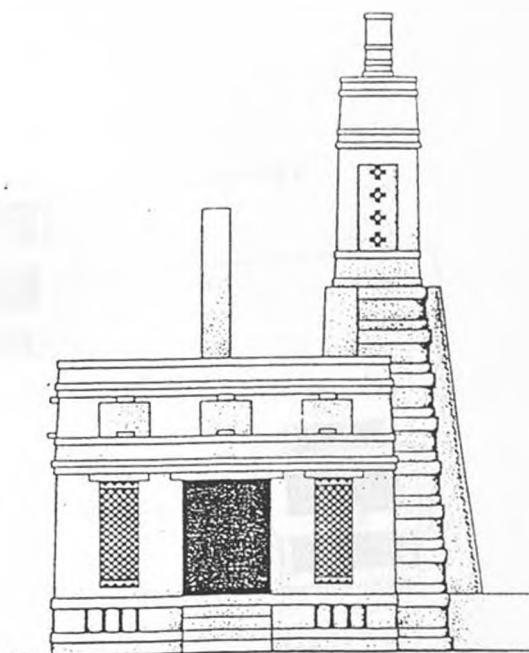


PLAN AT UPPER LEVEL OF TOWERS



PLATFORM

b



c

Fig. 13 Xpuhil, Str. I- a) (restored) east facade (Ruppert and Denison 1943: fig. 110), b) plan at upper level of towers (G. Andrews 1988).

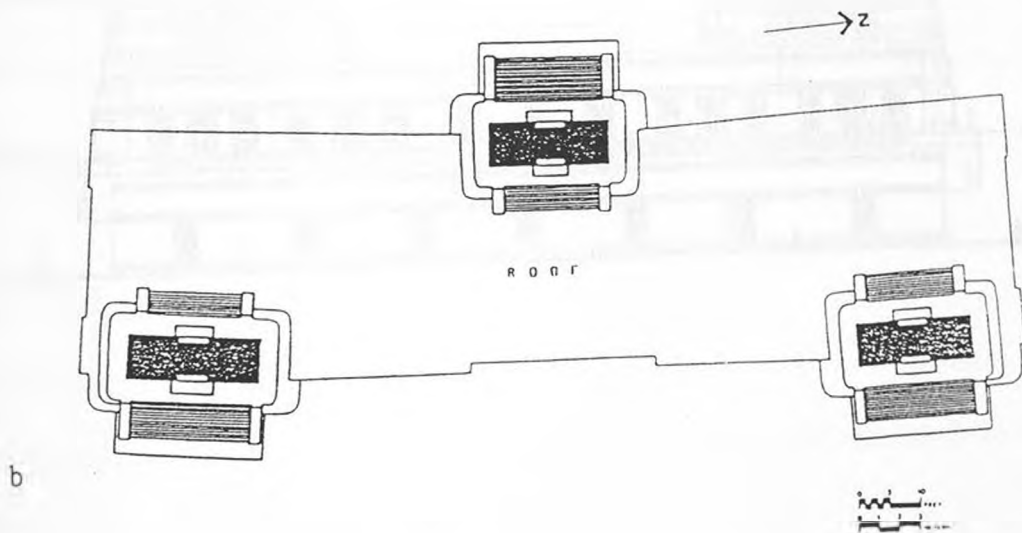
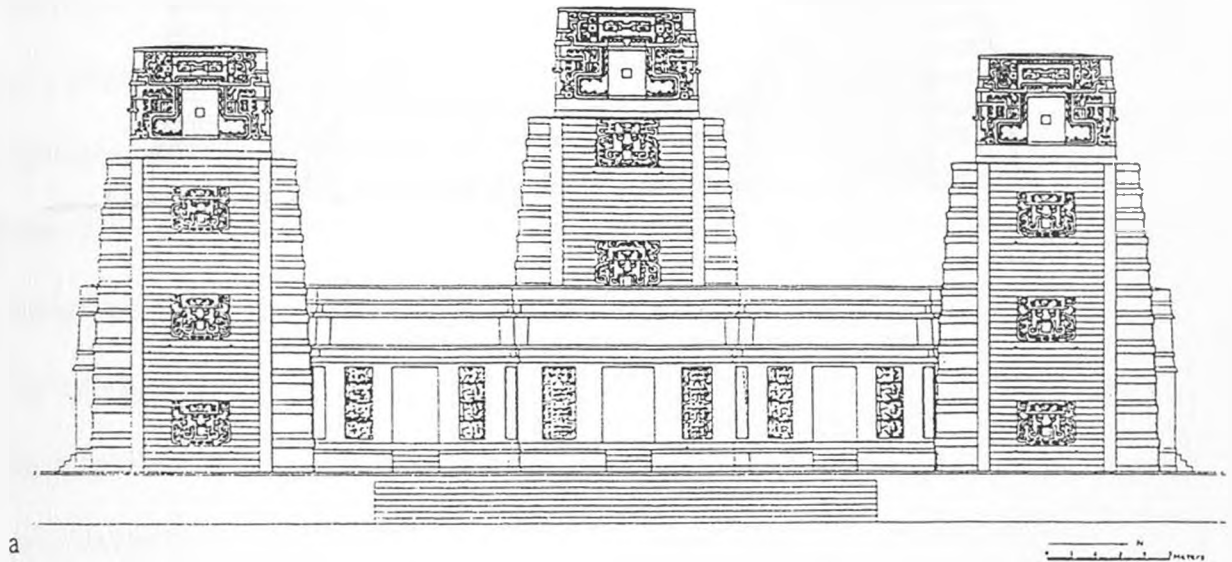
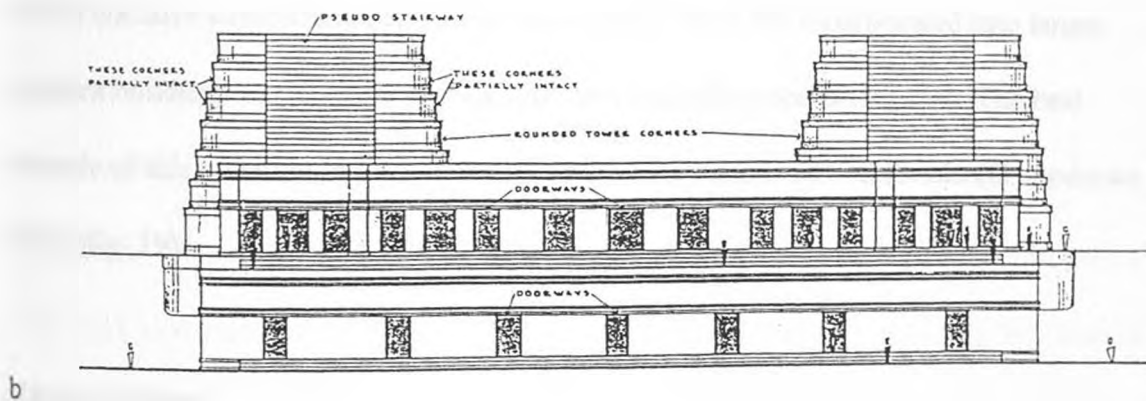
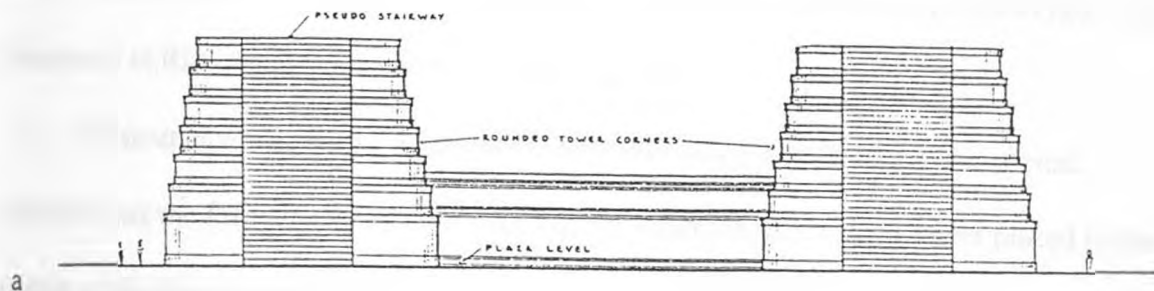


Fig. 14 Becán, Str. I- restoration of a) north facade and b) south facade (Potter 1977: fig. 39).



Under the best preservation conditions, evidence of a roof comb, of the style described above, survives atop the symbolic temple. The ideal version of the 'typical' twin tower complex, that incorporates most of these features and is in a good state of preservation, is Structure I at Río Bec B (G. Andrews 1988) (fig. 12).

Of course, not all 'typical' towers follow this ideal, and there are some small variations on the form. Structure I at Xpuhil, for example, has a third tower placed in the middle of the range building (fig. 13). For no obvious reason, some towers house interior stairways and passageways, while other do not. It seems clear however, that even with these variations, the detailed features remain consistent enough to classify them with the other 'typical' towers (G. Andrews 1988).

'Atypical' towers clearly deviate from the typical form and constitute a classification of their own. While still retaining a pyramidal shape and a non-functional stairway in some cases, these towers are more massive and squat than the 'typical' towers and do not have superstructures. Most importantly, they are incorporated into larger, complex buildings in a slightly more subtle and variable manner (fig. 14). The best example of this diversity in arrangement is found in Structure IV at Becán (G. Andrews 1988) (fig. 19).

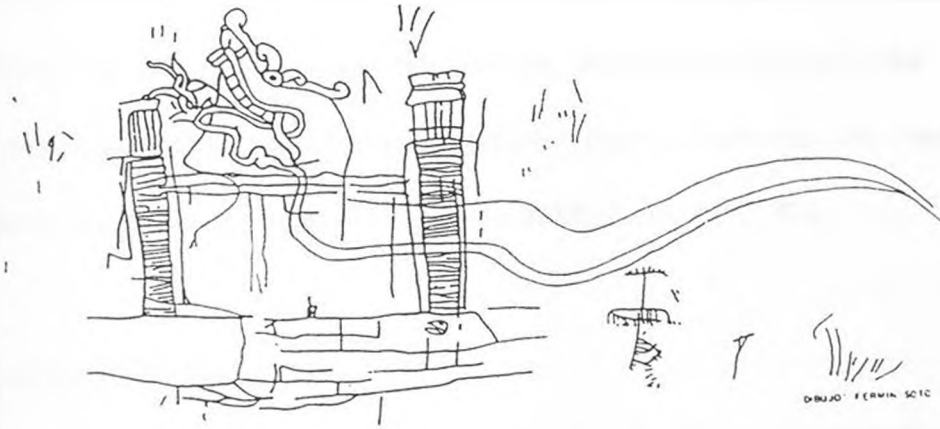
Interior Features

The interior features of Río Bec style buildings do not seem to vary too much. Floors in the rear rooms often are elevated above the level of front room floors by as

much as .50 m. As opposed to the walls of the exterior, interior walls, faced with relatively roughly-dressed blocks, required a heavy coat of stucco to smooth out the spawl between joints. Interior doorways, with the exception of the doorway between the front and back room, which is supported by a wooden lintel and tends to be wider than the exterior doorways, are generally rather narrow and have stone lintels. Vaults are constructed of roughly-dressed rounded or beveled stones, and sometimes bear an offset at the springline, though typically not in conjunction with rounded masonry (G. Andrews 1988; Potter 1977: 80).

Room furnishings consist of standard residential elements. Benches represent a distinctly common feature in many rooms. Three bench forms predominate, including: a raised rectangular platform at the ends of rooms, a u-shaped form, and a type that has either one or both ends raised as on a chaise longue (G. Andrews 1988). Cordholders take the form of small round posts set into niches, and tongue-shaped types set at different angles. Both are found on both sides of exterior doorways either low or high on the wall. Rod sockets are also occasionally found in doorjambs, both low and high. There are some instances of rod sockets on doorjambs for interior doorways, indicating a private function of the room. Wall niches are found scattered throughout the interior of buildings in no apparent pattern. The stairways and passageways, carrying low masonry vaults, are rather narrow as well and are found both within towers and elsewhere in buildings connecting rooms and levels. Exterior wall openings tend to occur more rarely than openings in walls between rooms (G. Andrews 1988; Potter 1977: 81-82).

Fig. 15 Graffiti- a) Chicanná, Str. II (Gendrop 1983: fig. 23b),
 b) & c) Río Bec V, Str. IV, room 2 (Ruppert and Denison 1943: figs. 37 & 38)



a



b



c

Interior decoration is sparse compared to that found on the exterior. Moldings of stucco, sometimes displaying a fluted design, have been applied at the spring level of vaults, below the capstone, low along rear walls, and along the top and bottom of benches. Some small niches, stucco heads, colonnettes, and other decorative forms also adorn the faces of benches. Beyond these few features, decoration is limited to the numerous examples of graffiti incised into the plaster of interior walls (fig. 15). And the red hand prints found at Manos Rojas (G. Andrews 1988; Potter 1977: 82).

Anomalies and Special Features

Certain anomalies and special features that express the diversity pervade the region and help balance the strict sense of regularity of the region's style. While the majority of the structures known in the region incorporate the style outlined above, many tend to do so in unique ways, combining the strict features of the style with unusual signature elements. Most of these deviations are variations of decorative features of structures, though some are the entire structures themselves.

The most common decorative feature to be differentially adapted is the column. Columns are used in many ways on buildings, the most typical being embedded in the base molding or lower wall zones in groups of three, and occasionally, attached at corners or used as door jambs. At Channa, Structure I has columns at even intervals across its facade. All the columns have three-part capitals and two are used in place of doorways to split the central room into three parts (G. Andrews 1988; Ruppert and Denison 1943:

64)(fig. 3). Another unusual use of columns is found at Horniguero's Structure II, where the north side of the structure is marked by a colonnade of eight large columns (.81- .86 cm in diameter) that encloses a narrow space (G. Andrews 1988; Martos López 1989: 51) (fig. 16). Finally, Structure I at the site of Culucbalom has engaged columns in its lower wall zone that, unlike any other known examples, carry sculpted relief of human figures (G. Andrews ; Ruppert and Denison 1943: 89) (fig. 10). Many of these modifications of the column exist more commonly in the Chenes and Puuc regions to the north. Further investigation of the distribution of these features and more secure dates for the structures that carry them would help reveal possible paths of influence between these regions.

The recently discovered site of Balamku carries sculpture of a scale and intricacy unknown at most well-documented sites in the region. As García Cruz explains, the facade (10 meter wide and 5 meters high) of the main palace-like substructure "is covered entirely by polychrome figures modeled in stucco" (1991: 43). Figures include a wide array of jaguar deities, masks, serpent heads, tapirs, and human figures. Surface ceramics indicate a potentially early date for the sculpture, between 300 B.C. and A.D. 600, a possibility substantiated by the Olmec style of its masks and human faces (García Cruz 1991: 44).

Of interest, in his survey of the region, Merwin describes sculpture on Structures I and II at Porvenir (1913: 37-39, 42-44), Structure I at Ramonal, Group A (1913: 56-60), and Structure I at Ramonal, Group B (1913: 66-68), in a similar fashion. While his

Fig. 16 Hormiguero, Str. II- plan of main level (G. Andrews 1988).

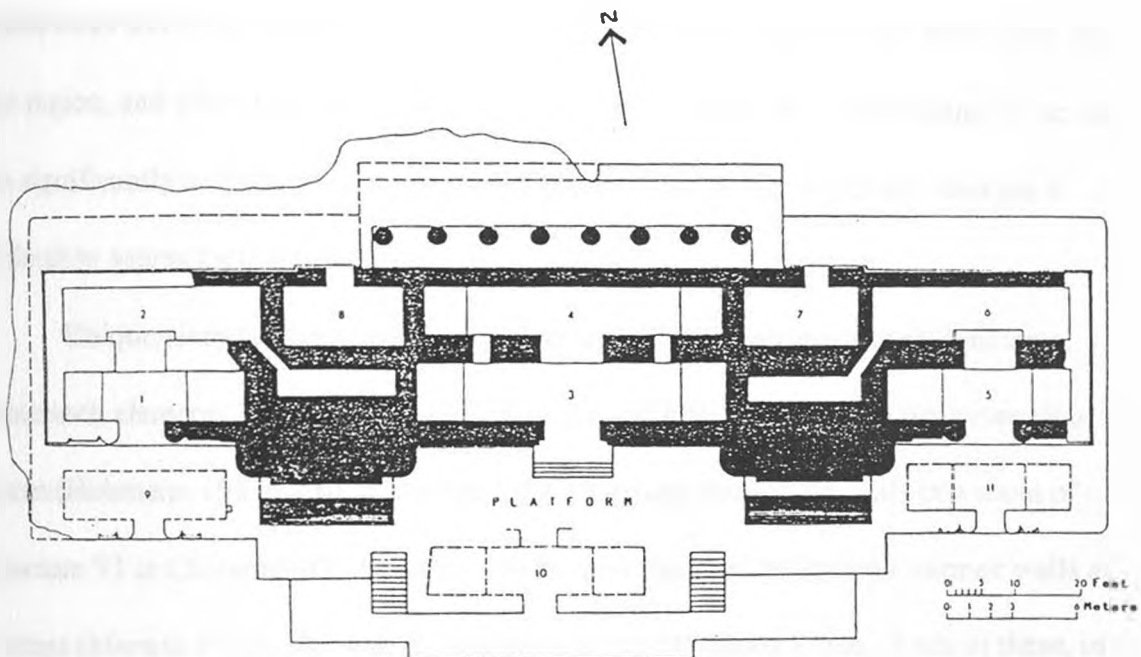
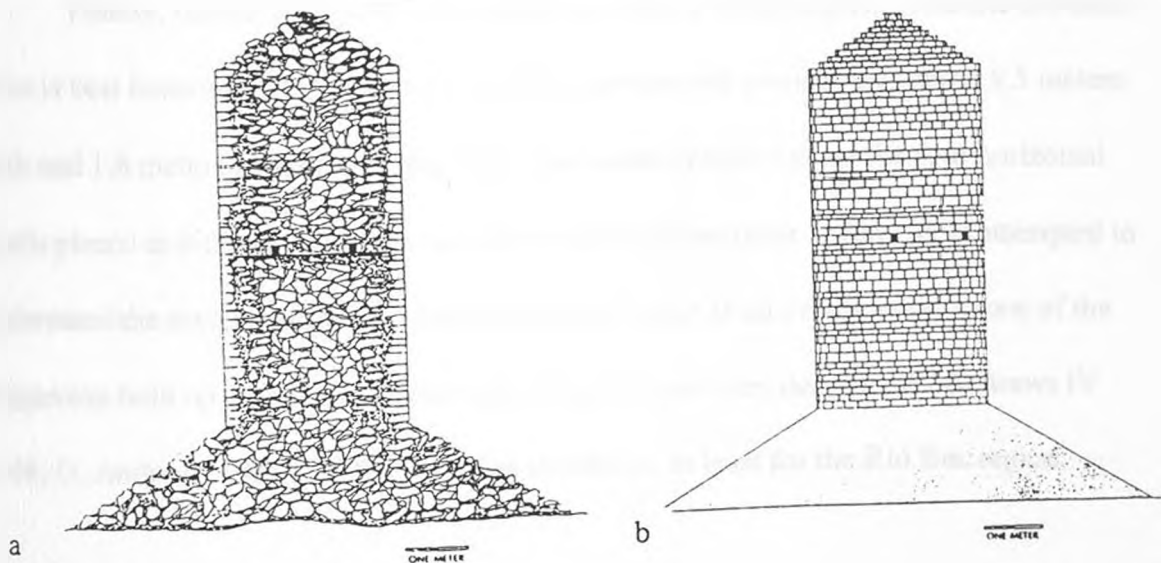


Fig. 17 Puerto Rico, Str. I (Round Tower)- a) section, b) (restored) elevation (E. W. Andrews, IV 1968: figs. 1 & 2).



descriptions seem to indicate the sculpture was limited to panels in the lower wall zone, they refer to elements such as realistic depictions of human figures with elaborate headdresses and intertwined serpents, motifs that are rarely reported for sites in the Río Bec region, and when they do emerge, are limited to roofcombs. Unfortunately, no one has significantly added to or confirmed his descriptions of this sculpture, making it difficult to assess their significance.

Unique elements have also been observed on the interior walls of structures. Some such elements include a patolli design incised into the plaster in Structure IV at Becán (Hohmann 1987a: 56), a painted figure (perhaps part of a mural) in a room of Structure VI at Chicanná (G. Andrews 1988), other painted designs on interior walls at Tortuga (Merwin 1913: 30), and the red hand prints at Manos Rojas. Each of these, in addition to the many examples of graffiti found incised into the plaster of interiors, could afford new information about the functions of the structures, and to the people who used them.

Finally, certain structures are themselves unique in the region. The site of Puerto Rico is best known for its Structure I, a finely constructed round tower about 8.5 meters high and 1.6 meters in diameter (fig. 17). The tower is solid except for four horizontal shafts placed at different points around the middle of the tower. Many have attempted to understand the tower's function, often proposing its use as an observatory. None of the suggestion hold up, and the building's meaning remains a mystery (E. W. Andrews IV 1968; G. Andrews 1988). Other unusual structures, at least for the Río Bec region,

include stelae, ballcourts, and amphitheatres. Most examples of these structures are found at the larger centers of Becán, Pechal, and Peor es Nada (Ruppert and Denison 1943: 92-94). Each of these structures conspicuously is built for public consumption. Because the structures at most sites do not illustrate overtly public functions, the existence of stelae, ballcourts, and amphitheatres at Pechal and Peor es Nada are especially worthy of note and further investigation.

Recognizing some of the major anomalies and unique features in the region is vital to the process of understanding how structures and sites function and how, through evidence of interaction at various scales, they relate to each other and to other regions. The fact that many of the aforementioned examples exist at as yet unexcavated sites calls special attention to the potential these sites have in changing or enhancing our view of Río Bec architecture and interregional integration.

CONSIDERATIONS OF BUILDING FUNCTION

Most buildings of the Río Bec region, of the form described above, exhibit some seemingly paradoxical features that keep the nature of their function somewhat enigmatic. Some scholars studying Classic Río Bec architecture have recognized curious dichotomies integrated in various aspects of building construction and ornamentation. The most obvious of these dichotomies is that existing between the external religious ceremonial ornamentation meant for public consumption, versus the very private, residential nature of the buildings' interior. Significantly, this problem is largely absent

at more substantial sites such as Becán (which will be examined separately in the next section) whose structures tend to illustrate rather obvious distinctions in terms of space relegated to administrative and ceremonial public functions, versus that reserved for private, residential use. Ideally, if the problem of function for the structures that make up the majority, especially at smaller sites, could be competently resolved, another valuable dimension of the sociopolitical environment of the Late Classic would emerge.

Eaton has dealt briefly with this dichotomy in his analysis of architecture at Chicanná (1972: 55), as have both G. Andrews and Gendrop (G. Andrews 1989; G. Andrews and Gendrop 1991). Finally, Martos López (1989) has looked specifically at Structure II at Hormiguero to try to elicit the meaning of the zoomorphic doorways and functions of tower complexes, focusing mainly on religious symbolism as his guide. His insights add an interesting and attractive perspective to the current interpretations. Here, I will simply outline some of the suggestions in an attempt to better reveal problems associated with clarifying the function of most Río Bec style buildings.

Almost all of the buildings of Late Classic Río Bec style exhibit external decoration of very obvious religious derivation. The varieties of monster masks and tower complexes are distinctive features of the style; yet, how these features might translate for a particular building's function is difficult to discern. Seen in the context of the greater Maya lowlands, these features would seem to code for a ceremonial or ritual function for the buildings which they adorn; however, in almost every case, the interior space indicates a private residential function for the structures. They display such

privatizing features as rod sockets and cordholders, with residential function indicated in the abundance of benches and wall niches found in almost every room. In fact, except for the few very large centers in the Río Bec region (Becán, Peor es Nada, and Pechal), there are seemingly few structures that serve an obvious religious or public function, except in ornamentation.

G. Andrews and Gendrop have advanced one way to reconcile this seeming contradiction, suggesting that these residential structures were clearly for members of the elite, who probably felt the need to adorn their facades with recognized legitimizing symbols of divine right, power, and intimidation (G. Andrews and Gendrop 1991: 14). Such would be the case for the zoomorphic masks, doorways, and tower complexes that at once could instill fear and awe in the citizens of the center. The masks would send a message that only those with divine authority could enter the 'serpent's mouth', a possible symbol for entering the underworld: all others were prohibited admittance. G. Andrews and Gendrop contend, for most smaller centers, there is:

a consistent pattern, wherein a one-story, range-type building with undoubted residential characteristics has deliberately been combined with symbolic pyramid-temples [and zoomorphic masks] . . . carrying a heavy load of both lineage and religious symbolism, to produce a 'special' elite-class residence which probably also included some administrative and-or ceremonial functions (G. Andrews and Gendrop 1991: 18).

So, while there is no clear distinction between residential space, administrative space, and ceremonial space, it is conceivable that all three functions were performed within the confines of the same building.

It is within this context that Martos López's analysis is most applicable. Focusing primarily on the external decoration of Structure II at Hormiguero, which incorporates both the zoomorphic doorway and typical tower complex features, Martos López uses interpretations of symbolism and iconography to try to understand how the building might have functioned. He claims, in accordance with Gendrop (1980; 1985a; 1985b), that the zoomorphic doorways are somehow associated with the cult of the sacred cave and the deity Itzamná. Additionally, the twin towers could have symbolized sacred mountains, capable of calling the rain clouds, receiving the rain, and depositing it into the sacred caverns. Martos López interprets the niches and masks that adorn the stairs of some tower structures as symbolic entrances to caves. Significantly, Itzamná is often represented as a creature that incorporates attributes of the earth and of water, is able to summon rain to the earth to make it fertile, and thus can determine cycles of growth, life, and death (Martos López 1989: 55-56).

Water and rain would have been of high value to people in the Río Bec region, where rainfall is somewhat erratic, and there is little surface water available. Also, as Gendrop contends (1980), the corner masks, adorning other buildings in the region, are formed in the guise of the rain god Chaac, further indicating a focus on the importance of rain. It makes sense that the ruling class would use symbols associated with powerful deities who govern the rains, fertility, life, and death to decorate their residences as an illustration of their divinely bestowed authority (Martos López 1989: 52, 55-57).

Whether these buildings would have been used for actual ceremonies including initiation

and purification rites, and rituals to summon rain and to ensure fertility and life, as Martos López suggests, remains unclear, and will remain so until further excavation and investigation reveals relevant confirming evidence.

As has been demonstrated, great strides have been made to elucidate the possible uses of these Late Classic Río Bec buildings, primarily through attempts to interpret how their ornamentation might give clues to their functions. While it certainly remains possible that one structure could serve more than one function, i.e., ceremonial, administrative, and residential, the evidence as yet fails to sufficiently reflect this suggestion. On the other hand, the above analyses are not without merit, for they relate sound hypotheses worthy of extensive testing to evaluate their validity. Additionally, they should inspire others to examine and offer new ways to address the problem of function for these structures.

SITE ORGANIZATION AND HIERARCHY

The many architectural surveys in the Río Bec region can also reveal something about the relative organization and size of sites during the Classic period. Based on the results of settlement and architectural surveys, various evaluations concerning the relative hierarchy of sites have been made that help explain the relation of these sites to each other at one period in time.

The majority of Río Bec sites with monumental architecture that have been surveyed exhibit loosely organized civic plans with buildings of the type described above.

Larger sites such as Becán, however, tend to have more discrete civic plans and significantly more diverse building types (Adams 1981b: 220; Potter 1977: 45). A closer examination of the architectural diversity of Becán in relation to other centers, followed by a discussion of some assessments of site hierarchy, should indicate some aspects of differential distribution of authority throughout the region, at least at the level of 'centers'. Unfortunately, studies of the settlement between these 'centers' have been strictly limited to the area circumventing Becán, an obvious deficiency in the record for this process of analysis.

Becán, considered one of the three largest sites in the region (in line with Pechal and Peor es Nada), illustrates a diversity in building type, style, and arrangement unparalleled at other Río Bec sites. Unlike most other sites, Becán has a ballcourt, has massive structures with atypical towers or no towers at all, and shows evidence of some free-standing temple-pyramids. Perhaps most striking is Becán's organized civic plan, another characteristic not shared by any other centers in the region (fig. 18). Potter further describes Becán's uniqueness: "Of the numerous monumental structures, most of the larger ones were grouped around two, or at the most three, plazas notable for their variability in size, form and probably, function. The four best known structures are markedly different from one another" (1977: 11).

Although most of the details of construction and decoration at Becán are identical to those throughout the region, Becán obviously benefited from a larger work force capable of designing and building more unique, complex, and massive structures.

Fig. 18 View of Becán from the southeast by Pedro R. Dozal after
Potter and Gendrop (Gendrop 1983: fig. 16)

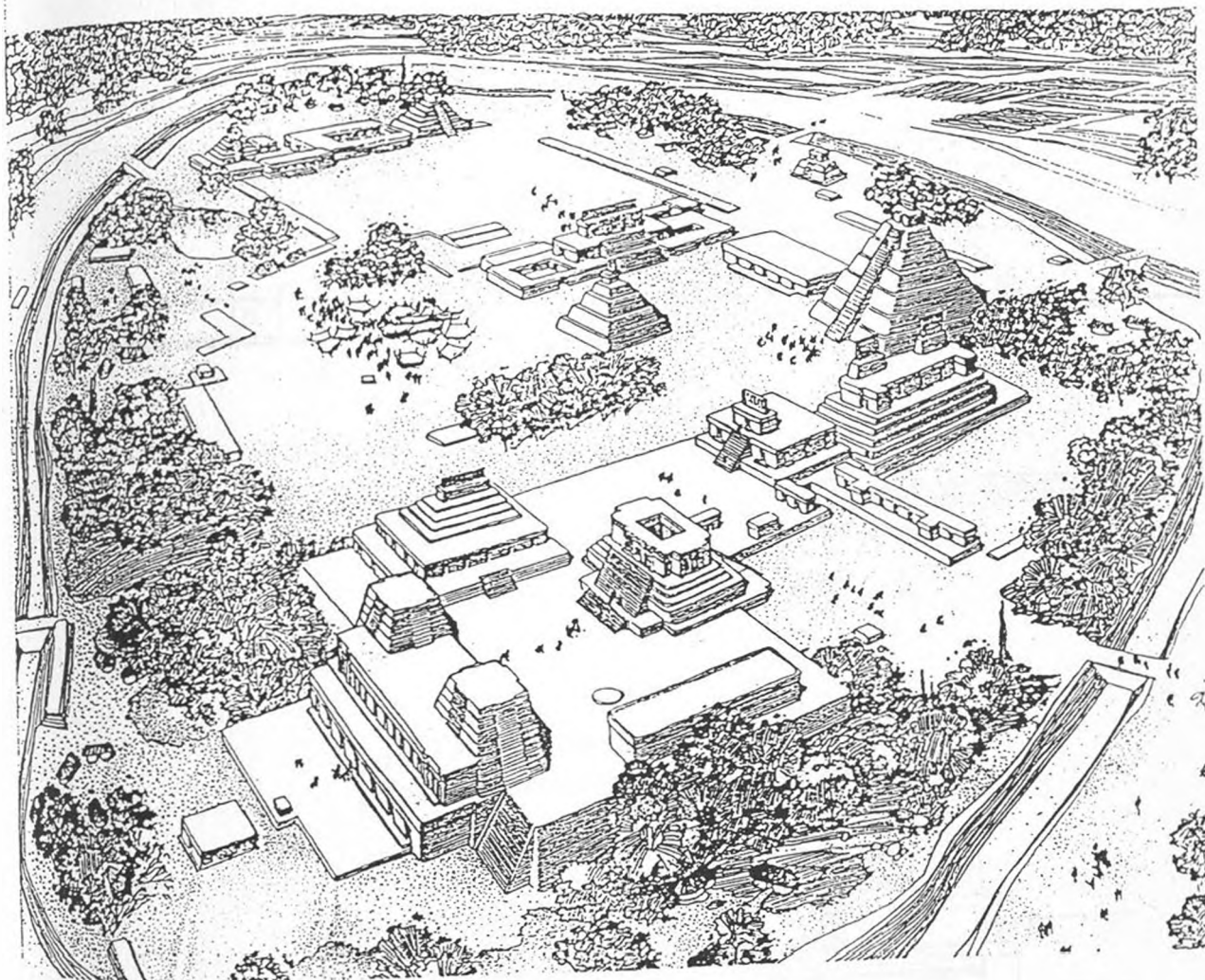
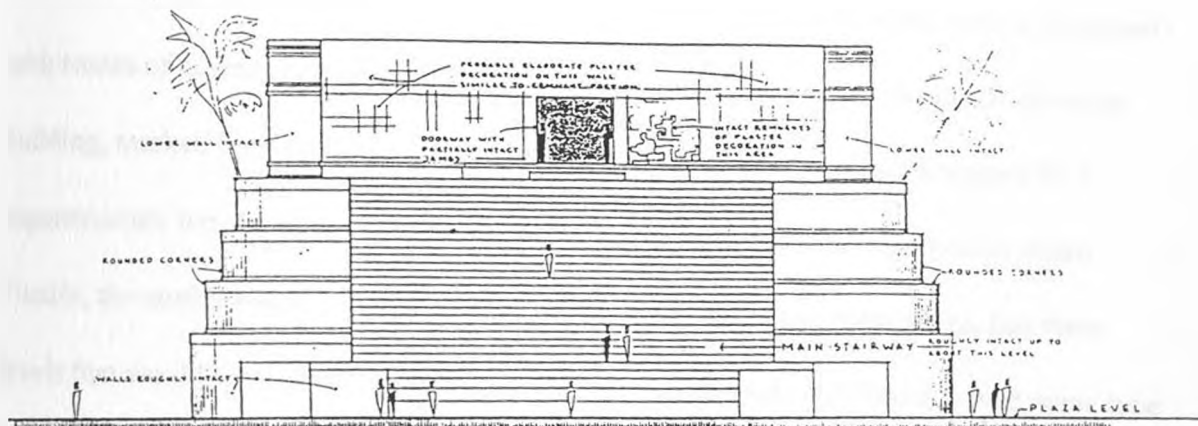
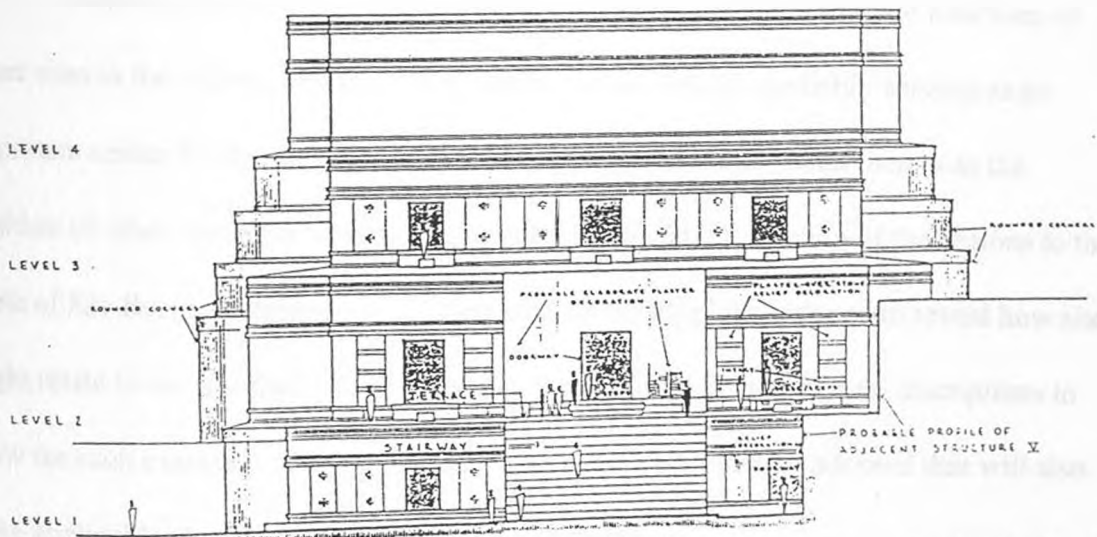


Fig. 19 Becán Structure IV a) restored south side, b) restored north side (Potter 1977: figs. 2 & 3).



a

METERS 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
 EXCEPT FOR INTACT AREAS INDICATED, MOST OF THIS VIEW IS CONJECTURAL BASED ON EVIDENCE VARYING IN FIRMNESS
 WEST ← → EAST



b

METERS 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
 EXCEPT FOR LOWER PORTIONS OF WALLS OF LEVELS 1 AND 2, WHICH ARE PARTIALLY INTACT, MOST OF THIS VIEW IS CONJECTURAL BASED ON EVIDENCE VARYING IN FIRMNESS
 WEST ← → EAST

Buildings such as Structure IV (fig. 19) illustrate this complexity through their obvious emphasis on multifunctionality. For example, the isolated upper level of Structure IV seems to have had a clear private function: it is framed by rooms facing onto a courtyard with routes of access limited to a narrow interior stairway. The south side of the same building, marked by a monumental staircase, faces into the plaza and is topped by a superstructure temple whose ornamentation suggests a public and ceremonial intent. Finally, the northern side of the building, facing away from the main plaza, has three levels that would have given easier access to the public, and could have served some type of administrative functions (G. Andrews 1988; Potter 1977: 45). The attention given to organization apparent for this structure reverberates throughout the site and characterizes the organization of the site itself, indicating that a premeditated civic plan had been employed from the time the site's fortifications were built (by A.D. 250) and the site was becoming an integrated center.

When compared to the haphazard arrangement and indeterminate functions of other sites in the region, Becán clearly stands out as special, probably serving as an important center for the majority of the time it was occupied. What then, was the position of other so-called 'centers' in relation to Becán? For many of the regions to the south of Río Bec, researchers have relied heavily on glyphic evidence to reveal how sites might relate to one another. So far, the Río Bec region has supplied no inscriptions to allow for such examinations. As a result, other methods must be adopted that will also prove applicable elsewhere for comparative analysis.

R. E. W. Adams (1981b), as part of his settlement analysis of the Río Bec region, developed a system of ranking for the majority of the sites identified. His ranking, based primarily on a counting of courtyard groups, distinguishes between five main groups defined in the following fashion:

Group 1 consists of one-courtyard units. A somewhat more arbitrary division groups sites with 2 to 4 courtyards together to form Group 2. Group 3 thereby begins with 5 and goes to 9 courtyards. Group 4 is the three sites with 12 courtyards [Becan, Pechal, and Peor es Nada] . . . The final group (5) has but one site, Río Bec itself, which has 26 courtyards (Adams 1981b: 230).

Of the problems with this system is one that Adams recognizes himself: it is not well understood how the twenty or so sites named 'Río Bec' are related to each other, or whether they even constitute a single site. While all of these groups are geographically close to each other, they do not independently or collectively display the level of complexity, ingenuity, planning, or labor required in the construction of Becán, and as such, probably should not be recognized as higher in rank than Becán.

Another inherent problem with Adams's system of ranking is that he bases it exclusively on numbers of courtyards despite the fact that organization around courtyards is, for the most part, a concept foreign to Río Bec style sites. So, while it may help differentiate the very large sites from the next level in the hierarchy, it does little to reveal the relationship or function of sites within his Groups 1-3.

Based on analogy to sites in other regions of Mesoamerica and on the size, lack of complexity, and absence of clear evidence suggesting public function of Adams's

Groups 1-3, it can only presently be assumed that these sites represent elite outposts, and served to administer and redistribute goods and services at a local level, and perhaps to collect tribute for the rulers at Becán.

Finally, Adams and Jones (1981) attempt to use this system of rank ordering to make comparisons between regions about political organization and power. Based on the regional size and number of centers existing in the Petén, they determine that centers like Tikal and Calakmul exercised "greater spatial influence and importance" (Adams and Jones 1981: 308) than the centers in the Río Bec region. Unfortunately, the system successfully recognizes that Tikal and Calakmul were large centers, but does little to explain the nature of the political influence and structure of the Río Bec region (that was potentially wider than previously thought as explained in the following section), or why the Río Bec region successfully avoided the Petén influence that reached its 'borders' but failed to cross them.

While a system of ranking presently seems the best way to approach the question of the relationship between centers, the system must rely on features that are known to characterize the sites of the region, or the system proves worthless. Ideally, features would be weighted in a way that reflects their relative importance to the society that employed them (G. Andrews 1988). Unfortunately, prominent diagnostic features can vary significantly from region to region, making interregional comparisons of hierarchy and organization practically impossible.

Stelae, for example, are highly common at sites in the Petén region, but were not erected at most sites in the Río Bec region. This observation in itself deserves scrutiny, but specifically, how might it reflect the relative status, or significance, of sites in these two regions that seem similar, except for their number of stelae? Should features in one region be weighted more heavily than in another region because they seem to have greater significance in one than the other, or is it valid to assume that features carried equal status throughout the Maya lowlands?

Based on the wide diversity evident through many aspects of the archaeological record for parts of the Maya lowlands, and the simple concept of differential access to certain resources that help define what might be considered valuable to a society, it does not seem likely that all features held equal value throughout the Maya lowland universe. Clearly, the question of site hierarchy and intersite integration is yet another problem that will remain a mystery until more investigation is done at and between the smaller, less well-known sites. Additionally, it would prove worthwhile to do more intensive excavations at sites that rank high in Adams system, but about which we know very little: Pechal, Peor es Nada, and the collection of 'Río Bec' sites are sure to add new and fundamentally important perspectives to this and other questions. The Río Bec region aptly illustrates the diversity of the lowlands and the need to develop a better, more consistent and relevant model by which to evaluate issues of intersite and interregional sociopolitical organization.

ORIGINS AND INFLUENCE OF LATE CLASSIC RIO BEC ARCHITECTURE

The development of Late Classic Río Bec architecture is another somewhat perplexing problem, that holds clues to the nature of the region's internal integration. Examining questions of the style's origins and relationships with external forces bears on issues of the region's autonomy and the development and nature of its political, social, and economic relations with other regions.

As will be argued, the development of the Río Bec architectural style appears to have been a predominantly regional and swift occurrence, independent of significant outside influence. In fact, the closest neighboring region to the south, northern Petén, with Calakmul as its northernmost large center, displays a style that proves astonishingly different from that of the Río Bec region. The Río Bec style finds much greater affinity with the Chenes style located to the north, though both styles retain distinct local traits that suggest they evolved from largely divergent regional traditions. Finally, some recently researched sites in southern Quintana Roo show intriguing features that combine styles from the Petén and Río Bec region. While the implications of this new information are not fully understood, the sites promise to add a fresh perspective to the problem.

In order to explore the options of origins and influence for the Late Classic Río Bec style, it is necessary to review its position in the connected contexts of time and space. Both Gendrop (1987) and Bueno (1992) have produced architectural sequences for the development and manifestation of the Classic Río Bec style that help explain some of the factors involved in the internal evolution of this style. While the two

disagree on some details pertaining to specific periods, a broad summary of the main features of these sequences should provide an appropriate backdrop for the remainder of this discussion:

Río Bec Temprano (A.D. 570- A.D. 630)

This period is characterized principally by the quantity of major construction at Becán, and the rise of Becán as the center of a politically united region. It is believed to be the time that the program of monumental construction started to intensify with the buildings of Becán Structures I, III, IV, and VIII. It was with these structures that many of the unique features of the architectural style took shape. If outside influences were to be important in the development of the style, evidence of them should be prominent at this crucial stage. This period also marks the beginnings of checkerboard and cross panels and crude versions of profile masks, seen on Becán Structures I, IV, and XX. The zoomorphic doorway at Corriental might also date to this period. (Gendrop 1987: 44; Bueno 1992: 8-9).

Río Bec Exuberante- Interrelacion Río Bec-Chenes (A.D. 630- A.D. 770)

Phase I (A.D. 630- A.D. 670)

In this period, the typical tower complex form, profile masks and panels, and both partial and complete zoomorphic doorways were becoming prominent features in monumental architecture. Significantly, at least by the end of this period.

zoomorphic doorways were integrated into Chenes architecture as well, indicating clear exchange of ideas, though the dates are not secure enough to indicate where the tradition first arose. Both Bueno and Gendrop see stacked corner masks as having originated in the Chenes region, with an introduction into Río Bec occurring relatively late (Gendrop 1987: 17; Bueno 1992: 9-10).

Phase II (A.D. 670- A.D. 770)

Throughout this period Río Bec style continues to grow in sophistication and complexity while retaining most basic details. It was probably near the end of this period that the triple towers of Structure I of Xpuhil and Structure XI of Río Bec F were built (Gendrop 1987: 18-19; Bueno 1992: 11).

Río Bec Tardío (A.D. 770- A.D. 830)

Gendrop limits this period according to the ceramic sequence which marks the end of the Chintok phase and the Late Classic period as A.D. 830. Bueno guesses that the characteristics of the phase continue until about A.D. 900. At any rate, both Gendrop and Bueno recognize in the architecture a substantiation of the suggestion implied by the ceramic record of a migration of people from the north into the Río Bec region about this time. The earliest architectural implications of this move are manifested in buildings with large embedded columns and the colonnade of Structure II at Hormiguero (Bueno 1992: 13). This period also marks the end of significant monumental architecture represented primarily by

Structures V and VI at Hormiguero and Structure XVII of Río Bec I, each of which indicates a general decline in creativity and innovation (Gendrop 1987: 20).
Río Bec Terminal (A.D. 830/900- A.D. 1000?)

The only construction done during this period is in the remodeling of former structures and construction of less refined buildings that do not retain any of the features that preceded the period (Gendrop 1987: 48; Bueno 1992: 14-16).

As the above sequence suggests, the development of the Río Bec style is characterized by a rapid evolution of features over a surprisingly short period, followed by an equally swift degradation of the style. Especially intriguing is that this distinct, highly specialized, and sophisticated style seems to have evolved so quickly without appreciable influence from other regions, or an apparent 'prototype'. Similarities have been suggested between the Río Bec style and some features of Petén architecture, and with the Chenes style. Certainly there is proof that the Río Bec region was involved in a larger sphere of influence from which it borrowed and refined some motifs and techniques. Such interaction is not contested.

The major questions relate to the Río Bec region's level of autonomy and unity during the Late Classic: 1) to what extent does Río Bec architecture reveal a subordination of the region to a more powerful political entity such as Calakmul or Tikal, and 2) does Río Bec architecture illustrate substantial affinities with that of the Chenes region to indicate that the two regions should be seen as subregions of a greater Central

Yucatan architectural region? As will be revealed, none of the suggested similarities with the Petén or the Chenes regions provide sufficient evidence to lead one to believe that the architects of the Río Bec region were working from anything other than a locally inspired, adapted, and strictly applied tradition. An examination of the Río Bec region in relation to its nearest neighbors shows it to be consistently unique.

The Petén

The Late Classic architectural style and organization of sites in the Río Bec region contrasts sharply with that of the Petén. The contrasts are especially striking considering that the regions border each other so closely without any appreciable space separating them. Andrews marks some of the most crucial aspects of the Río Bec style and organization that diverge from that of the Petén:

- 1) Lack of high, free-standing pyramid-temple structures of the kind that dominate the skylines of other settlements.
 - 2) Lack of buildings which can clearly be identified as temples.
 - 3) Presence of numerous tower complexes of two different types [typical and atypical].
 - 4) Emphasis on multi-chamber, range-type buildings with six or more rooms . . . with three-part, articulated facades.
 - 5) Lack of large, acropolis-type complexes which are prominent in many other regions.
 - 6) Very few stelae, particularly in comparison to sites just to the south, where they are found in large numbers.
 - 7) Lack of hieroglyphic inscriptions in association with buildings.
 - 8) Minimal use of sacbes.
 - 9) Relatively small number of ballcourts.
 - 10) Emphasis on decorative features on lower wall zones.
- (G. Andrews 1988)

While there are some exceptions to the above traits, primarily at Becán, the list proves accurate for the majority of sites within the Río Bec region.

Despite these contrasts, students of the Río Bec region, in an attempt to explain the origins of its Late Classic style, have consistently looked to the Petén as a certain source of influence for the style, particularly in reference to the style's hallmark, the twin tower complex. Many people observing the Río Bec tower complexes have proposed that their designers must have taken their inspiration from the temple-pyramids at Tikal (Ball 1977; Eaton 1972; 1974; Potter 1977; Ruppert and Denison 1943; Seufert 1974). Andrews and Gendrop (1991) severely criticize this position, exhaustively illustrating how Río Bec tower complexes are in every detail different from temple-pyramids at Tikal: "... if the Río Bec builders did in fact use the pyramid-temples as models for their own towers, they must have been extraordinarily myopic, since they managed to get every detail dead wrong" (G. Andrews and Gendrop 1991: 12). Table 3 reviews the major differences between the two types of structures.

An evaluation of these arguments reveals that drawing conclusions about influence and authority based on comparisons of architectural styles is a highly complicated endeavor, whose methodology is not well-articulated and whose benefits are not yet fully realized. In an effort to come closer to recognizing how comparisons of some aspects of architectural style help determine complex relations between regions, all arguments require considerable exploration from various perspectives to determine their strengths and weaknesses. For example, when analyzing the Río Bec tower complex, it

TABLE 3
RIO BEC TOWERS VS. TIKAL TEMPLE-PYRAMIDS

FEATURES	RIO BEC TOWERS	TIKAL TEMPLE-PYRAMIDS
Stairways	<p>Flat, narrow ramps flank the central stairway</p> <p>Many stairways have mask panels inset into their risers</p> <p>Risers are of two courses of stone</p>	<p>No ramps</p> <p>No inset mask panels</p> <p>Risers are only one course</p>
Pyramids	<p>Rounded corners</p> <p>Simple, rectangular moldings</p> <p>Stepped sides are vertical</p>	<p>Square, inset corners</p> <p>Complex, apron-type moldings</p> <p>Stepped sides are sloped</p>
Temples	<p>Simple, rectangular plans</p> <p>Symmetrical about both axes</p> <p>Symbolic doorways on front and back</p> <p>Vertical recessed panels w/ cross decoration in end walls</p>	<p>Complex plans- rear section separated from front</p> <p>Symmetrical about central axis</p> <p>Single, functional doorway only on front</p> <p>No such decoration</p>
Roofcombs	<p>Centered over the building</p> <p>Perforated, single-wall type</p> <p>No distinction between front and back</p>	<p>Rise over the back part of building</p> <p>Large, hollow masses with perforations only at the top</p> <p>Heavy stucco sculpture on front: backs are plain</p>

(based on G. Andrews and Gendrop 1991: 19-20)

might be premature to reject altogether the possibility of some sort of Petén influence. While the details of construction techniques and features are decidedly unique to the Río Bec region, perhaps the resemblance to Tikal temple-pyramids in terms of their collective aesthetic impression of steep, graceful, and imposing structures, should not be ignored. The following model outlines an alternative perspective for the Tikal temple-pyramid/Río Bec tower complex problem.

Río Bec builders began constructing typical tower complexes during the Bejuco phase, a period of regionalization in craft production and intense growth in population, settlement, and overall complexity. It could also be seen that this was a period when the Río Bec region as a whole was asserting its autonomy, separate from the Petén, and specifically from Calakmul or Tikal to the south. In order to legitimize that autonomy, Río Bec builders might have tried to make elite residences symbols of power. Certainly the temple-pyramids at Tikal were mighty symbols of power for much of the Maya lowlands. By mimicking this symbol from a former authoritative power, converting its construction, decorative, and especially functional characteristics into those of a distinctive Río Bec style (the form of which was probably derived from the earlier structures at Becán, for example), builders could perpetuate a sense of autonomy and authority. In other words, it is possible to see the typical twin tower complexes as representative of an active reclamation and redefining of the temple-pyramid, previously a symbol of Río Bec subordination, reducing its sanctimonious connotation to one of pure symbolism of the political unity and power of the Río Bec region. In this way,

recognizing a similarity in appearance of the two types of structures helps illustrate the Río Bec region's possible independence from, rather than dependence on, the powers in the Petén. This model still looks to the Petén as a source of influence, but allows for the independent development of a regional Río Bec style.

Chenes

So, the question still remains: where did this highly distinctive, sophisticated style that characterizes Río Bec Late Classic architecture originate? As indicated by the sequence provided above, though there are some rudimentary Early Classic versions of decorative features, such as a possible early zoomorphic doorway at Culucbalom, and the early examples of the style at Becán, even these are too highly advanced to be easily acknowledged as 'precursors'.

There do seem to exist many more similarities between the Chenes style of architecture and that of Río Bec than between that of the Petén and Río Bec. That is not to suggest that one style gave rise to the other. Zoomorphic doorways repeatedly have been referred to as a mark of a 'Chenes-style building' (Eaton 1974: 134). In reality, it is not clear where the feature originated, and the designation of it as 'Chenes' only indicates where the feature was first documented.

The recognition of certain similarities has also led many to claim the similarities are sufficient in quality and quantity to consider Chenes and Río Bec as subregions of a Central Yucatan region characterized by a single architectural tradition (Eaton 1972;

1974; Potter 1977). Potter specifically contends, “that the central Yucatan region . . . had one characteristic architectural style that prevailed during a major portion of the Late Classic period, and that the distinctions between the two portions of the region [the Río Bec and Chenes portions] are not really significant” (1977: 2). It is the last part of this statement that proves debatable.

Some of the similarities that form the base for the so-called ‘Central Yucatan style’ are said to be demonstrated in the following: 3-part facades; sculptural decoration at all levels with realistic, conventionalized, and geometric motifs in relief; zoomorphic doorways; stacked corner masks depicting a long-nosed god; applied columns in groups of three; towers; and single-walled roof combs (Potter 1977: 87-88). While it is true that both regions exhibit many of these features, the details and placement of them is such that an undeniably clear and significant distinction serves to isolate the two styles.

The sculptural decoration, for example, while similar in form and indicating obvious interrelation of the two regions, is incorporated into building facades differently. While the majority of the sculpture in the Río Bec region is found in the lower wall zone, that in the Chenes region is found as often in the upper wall zone. Also, certain details such as the checkerboard and cross patterns, and stylized monster masks that are uniformly found in recessed wall panels in Río Bec are variably incorporated into different designs in Chenes architecture (G. Andrews 1988). Towers of the Chenes region are in no way similar to those known in the Río Bec region: neither in appearance, construction, nor decoration. The temple-pyramids in the Chenes region resemble the

Río Bec towers more than their towers do, but again, they are functioning temple-pyramids with usable stairs and real, functional temple superstructures (Gendrop 1987: 2).

The zoomorphic doorways and stacked corner masks do seem to represent features that are equally important to and similarly incorporated into the architecture of both regions. This equal depiction of religious motifs by both regions should not be surprising, nor should this factor alone be considered reason to classify the two regions as part of the same whole, devoid of significant individual attributes. As Eaton himself explains, “Buildings with monster mouth doorways are found not only in the Río Bec and Chenes regions, but also in the Puuc region . . . on Las Monjas at Chichen Itza . . . and also on Temple XXII at Copan. . . This suggests a common Late Classic religious decorative theme implemented by architects with widely differing construction traditions and techniques” (1972: 45-46). Additionally, Gendrop has shown that Río Bec structures established a purely local variation of the zoomorphic doorway conception whereby a partial mask was built above the doorway, and the sides were depicted by the recessed panels with profile masks (instead of the fully integrated doorway where the monster mouth surrounded the top, sides, and often, bottom of the doorway) (Gendrop 1980: 150).

So, while zoomorphic doorways and stacked corner masks are obviously important in both regions, and likely derived from a shared source, considerable local/regional adaptations still occur. Most importantly, these few shared attributes do

not allow for the serious pronouncement of a single Central Yucatan style, or tradition. G. Andrews provides an important distinction:

When it can be demonstrated that a particular constellation of architectural, construction, and decorative features has become so standardized that the same constellation appears over and over again in a large number of buildings, this set of features becomes diagnostic for a specific style (G. Andrews 1988).

Where this condition has been met by the Chenes and Río Bec regions independently in terms of their Late Classic architectural styles (as has been indicated at the beginning of this chapter), there is little evidence to support an active 'standardization' of features that involves both these regions. Too many of the 'similarities' were adapted differently in the respective regions, and both regions show a predominance of seemingly locally instituted primary features.

As was true in comparing Río Bec architecture with the Petén style, being too quick to recognize the similarities between Río Bec and Chenes styles might overshadow key differences. One purpose of identifying architectural regions is to begin to understand the extent to which such regions rose to a state of solidarity, and how they may have identified themselves as appropriately independent political entities. As such, it would seem prudent to reduce the chance of lumping two unrelated groups together until overwhelming proof to the contrary is uncovered. Otherwise, if only one or two traits were necessary to group regions, all of the Maya lowlands could be seen as a single homogenous architectural 'region'; a clearly inapplicable and ineffective means of categorization.

Overwhelming evidence for evaluation of the regions' respective levels of solidarity and independence is lacking. Neither the land between the Chenes and Río Bec regions, nor the sites within the regions themselves have been adequately investigated, and solid dates are rare. Until researchers recover more evidence and establish a sound method by which to evaluate that evidence, the two regions should be considered separately.

Southern Quintana Roo

The area of southern Quintana Roo, east of the Río Bec region, has recently been exposed to intense investigative projects, particularly at the larger sites of Dzibanché, Kinichná, and Kohunlich. Recent research, especially at Kohunlich, has shown 1) that many structures at these larger sites display a style of architecture that combines Río Bec and Petén styles, in addition to locally realized features; and 2) that both Río Bec and Petén styles are represented in a structure, but in different construction phases. Also, the road from Escarcega to Chetumal shows a practically uninterrupted expanse of settlement (in the form of housemounds) from Río Bec through much of southern Quintana Roo. These preliminary observations reveal the potential that studies in southern Quintana Roo have both to help resolve questions of origins and influence and to substantially add to the issue's complexity.

The most famous structure at Kohunlich is its Structure I, the pyramid of the masks. The structure, with its four pairs of massive masks flanking its central stairway,

exhibits features that resemble most closely the style of the Petén, or more particularly, of northern Belize. In contrast, however, Structures VI-A and VII-sub at Kohunlich display characteristics that follow the Río Bec style very closely. Specifically, Structure VI-A has

a three-member base molding with groups of three inset colonnettes in the central member, recessed panels in the lower walls (which may have carried sculpture), rounded doorjambes in the two exterior doorways, large, three-quarter long columns at the corners, and large niches, or recesses, in the east wall of room two. . . (G. Andrews 1987: 24).

Structure VII-sub actually shows evidence of a twin tower complex, complete with “nonfunctional stairways with ramps on both sides and stepped sides with rounded corners marked off by rectangular, horizontal moldings” (G. Andrews 1987: 27).

Andrews claims, on the basis of this and other evidence, that Structure VII-sub was either modeled after or was the precursor of Structure IV at Becán (G. Andrews 1987: 27).

Do the similarities outlined above represent antecedents for the Río Bec style, are they simply examples of borrowing stylistic elements from a foreign region, or do they reflect that the entity responsible for instituting the Río Bec architectural style itself spread farther east at some point in history? Unfortunately, the spatial and temporal information necessary to adequately speculate about such intriguing questions is desperately lacking for most sites in southern Quintana Roo, including Kohunlich. Removal of these limitations, however, promises to quickly reveal new insight into origins and influence of Río Bec architecture, and larger issues of political organization and development and expansion of the region through space and time.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

The most valuable tools available from the current archaeological record for the Río Bec region emerge from two primary areas of research: 1) that which deals with the minutiae of ceramics, lithics, and other artifacts (for convenience referred to hereafter as "culture history"); and 2) that which describes and analyzes aspects of architecture. Although these two areas of research are crucial for piecing together the culture evolution of the people who have occupied the Río Bec region, they also carry with them certain biases that hinder that process. Culture history research covers a large span of time, but geographically is limited to the site and environs of Becán, only a small portion of the region. Architecture studies, on the other hand, include sites from a wide geographical area, but are almost exclusively limited to the single period of the Late Classic.

Nonetheless, the culture history of the region provides a solid, useful chronology of effects of various processes of cultural evolution, while architectural studies provide tools by which to examine the region's political organization for one point in time. Evaluation of the relative strengths and weaknesses of these areas of research, especially in terms of their ability to address larger questions about motivations for and mechanisms

of change, will clarify where current research falls short of the larger goals and where new and innovative techniques would prove beneficial.

The culture history of the Río Bec region, as it has been presented here (Chapter 3), effectively relates basic information concerning: trends and changes in artifact styles and types; beginnings and developments of monumental architecture and intensification of agriculture; major fluctuations in populations size and basic settlement patterns for the area around Becán; and possible evidence for influence from regions such as northern Yucatán, central Mexico, and the Petén. Unfortunately, culture history fails to allow much room for speculation about why, how, and on what scale such trends, changes, and fluctuations occurred, or what the nature of relations with other regions might have been. Tracing the evolution of the Río Bec region will highlight some implications of this problematical condition.

We can infer from the evidence that people practicing swidden agriculture had settled in and around the site of Becán by the Middle Preclassic period, or around 600 B.C. This inference naturally leads to numerous questions concerning the nature of settled life in the region. Because the evidence comes mainly from Becán, it is difficult to know what events led up to the migration, or why it took place. It could have been a single, isolated event with settlement concentrated only at Becán, or one that took place over a period of time, with settlements dotting the whole region. Without a better understanding of the extent and types of settlements in existence at this time, the nature of settlement remains a mystery.

These hypotheses also raise issues concerning the motivation for migration to the Becán area. The assumption, based on ceramic evidence, is that people moved to Becán from the Petén region in the south. Why they moved from an area with a highly favorable environment to one characterized by less rainfall, little surface water, erratic rainfall, and comparably poor soil is matter that incites speculation. The movement could have been a simple extension of the migrations that first brought people to settle in the Maya lowlands in the Early Preclassic. It might have been borne of the inability of swidden agriculture to support the growing population in the Petén. Or, perhaps the move represented a more deliberate placement at Becán of a splinter group from the Petén, who colonized the area because of its convenient location and access to trade routes. The evidence simply is not complete enough to substantiate any of these possibilities.

The culture history of the following centuries at and around Becán reveals several intriguing developments. The building of extensive defensive earthworks around the center by the beginning of the Early Classic period suggests conflict was endemic to the area at the time. As was outlined in Chapter 3, various plausible scenarios could be offered to explain why the occupants of Becán felt the need to build the fortification system. Artifacts of the period show a definite Teotihuacan influence; an influence that may have presented a threat to the people of Becán. Another possibility is that Becán was in the process of asserting its independence from powers in the Petén, and built the fortifications to prevent those powers from reaffirming their position of authority over the

area. Finally, the fortifications may represent more localized competition between Becán and the neighboring centers that were on the rise at the time.

It is in the context of the growth of centers in the Early Classic that existing architectural studies become most relevant and useful. These studies reveal that by the Late Classic period dozens of smaller centers with monumental architecture had been established in the region. Culture history studies show that the sustaining area of the Río Bec region was expanding and growing as well; a perceived need to support more people is evidenced by technology for intensified agriculture like terraces and raised fields. The architecture shows that a distinct architectural style was evolving in the Río Bec region during the Early Classic and reached its zenith during the Late Classic. Interestingly, during the same period that these sites seem to have coalesced into an architecturally identifiable region distinct from the Petén, many sites in the Petén experienced a "hiatus" in construction and inscriptions. Perhaps whatever caused the hiatus gave the Río Bec sites the opportunity to unite against and gain independence from the dominating power (Tikal or Calakmul) in the Petén. Again, the evidence does not disclose sufficient information. It does not address the rise of and extent of the smaller centers, nor does it indicate the discrete and changing nature of political and socioeconomic patterns of the region in relation to the Petén and other regions, a theme that aids the interpretation of the level of autonomy and influence the Río Bec region experienced throughout the Classic period.

Ideally, investigation of the events and trends of the following Terminal Classic and Postclassic periods would help clarify the character of the region in preceding periods. This ideal has not been realized. It can be demonstrated that whatever caused the abandonment of most centers in the southern Maya lowlands seems to have been at work in the Río Bec region as well. The processes that led to the collapse of centers have been the subject of extensive exercises in conjecture by many Mayanists who often are only armed with paltry supporting evidence. While the present data from the Río Bec region do not supply much relief to this dilemma, the unusual location of the region, at the northern edge of the southern lowlands, suggests the region surely possesses the potential to add a new dimension to the question of the Classic Maya collapse.

It has been shown that the juxtaposition of culture history and architectural studies of the Río Bec region permits the recognition of some hypotheses concerning the impetus for and nature of major changes that otherwise might have remained obscure. At the same time, though, that exercise shows the present corpus of data fails to verify adequately any of the proposed models for change.

Studies of Río Bec architectural style show great promise for illuminating aspects of the political organization of the region during the Late Classic. However, two major interdependent obstacles in the analyses prove unavoidable. Firstly, because of the inherently dynamic character of political organization in the Maya lowlands (Marcus 1993), a freeze-frame image of Late Classic architecture can only say so much without a stronger temporal context. The second limitation is associated with the failure to qualify,

or define, stylistic traits for the Maya lowlands in a standard manner similar to that which has been done for ceramics.

The negative effects of these two combined problems appear rampant through every evaluated aspect of the architecture, but perhaps are exemplified best in the essentially fruitless attempts to better understand, based on the evidence available through architectural studies, how sites both within and between regions related to each other in the past. As this is the essential and most valuable way of applying architectural studies to questions of political organization, these limitations are particularly burdensome. Clearly more focused research is needed.

Many of the mechanisms for reconciling the problems associated with culture history and architectural interpretations do exist, but are in their infancy and require more exploration and testing. One important overriding factor to keep in mind is the fluidity of boundaries over time. The Río Bec region was only the Río Bec region at one point in time but even that time is not very well defined.

In this light, several preliminary suggestions can be made for future work in the Río Bec area. Researchers must look to extending settlement studies to the areas beyond the immediate Becan zone, and far into Quintana Roo. Such studies should be designed to complement those already accomplished and should involve close scrutiny of extent and types of settlement and of agricultural intensification over time, in order to gain a better perspective on changes in population growth and social organization and interaction leading up to and following the Late Classic. Settlement studies and an

intensive survey of southern Quintana Roo alone would certainly prove invaluable to the understanding of this buffer zone (that includes the Río Bec region, southern Quintana Roo, and northern Belize) of the southern lowlands. In accordance with settlement studies, a strict program of palaeoecological studies be instrumental in assessing the environmental stresses and changes that occurred over time, and how these changes affected and were affected by culture changes.

Because the existing ceramic and lithic records for the area of the Río Bec region are so solid and comprehensive, extensive study of the distribution of these artifacts through space and time not only would reveal additional crucial evidence of change, but could also add a great deal to studies of trade patterns at local and regional levels, allowing for the economic aspect to be more aptly characterized (Ball 1993; Potter 1993).

Finally, because the Río Bec region's most complete evidence is in the form of architecture, better mechanisms by which to characterize architectural features are needed. Gendrop proposes that in order to approach architecture in the region, Mayanists must try to avoid the tendency of cataloguing features by arbitrary 'regions'. Rather, they should focus on demonstrating the distribution of features without the interference of arbitrary regional boundaries to better illustrate spatial and temporal patterns of influence and to eventually establish a clearer and more functional characterization of features (Gendrop 1983: 24). Unfortunately, this goal would require more extensive architectural surveys and substantially greater emphasis on excavation. At least the surviving evidence

provides enough information to form research designs with concise objective that could help eliminate some of the energy expenditure required for excavation.

It seems impossible to dispute the position that more intensive studies of the Río Bec region are absolutely vital to understanding the cultural changes and adaptations of the Maya lowlands at every level of political, social, ecological, and economic interaction. Certainly more avenues of research worthy of exploration exist for the Río Bec region than those mentioned here. I have simply outlined those that seemed to follow naturally from evaluations of the published data I deemed most comprehensive. The region has been shown to provide fertile ground for future investigation and for experimentation and testing of new methodologies and models; a prospect that should not go unrealized.

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