





## Research Article

# Late Postclassic Lowland Maya politico-ritual architecture: Temple assemblages and Zacpeten

Prudence M. Rice<sup>a</sup> , Don S. Rice<sup>a</sup> and Timothy W. Pugh<sup>b</sup> 

<sup>a</sup>Professors emeriti, Department of Anthropology, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL 62905, USA and <sup>b</sup>Timothy W. Pugh, Department of Anthropology, Queens College, 65-30 Kissena Boulevard, Flushing, NY 11367, USA

### Abstract

Late Postclassic lowland Maya civic-ceremonial masonry architecture appears in two main configurations—temple assemblages and basic ceremonial groups—first identified at Mayapan. Around the Peten lakes, these two architectural complexes have been tied to northern immigrant Kowoj and Itzas, respectively, and their distributions map the varying control over the lakes by these two ethnopolities. Temple assemblages exhibit considerable variation in their structural components and arrangements throughout the lowlands, but they have not been studied comparatively. Here, we examine 14 temple assemblages at 12 lowland sites. We consider one of the two assemblages at Zacpeten (Sak Peten), Group A, to have been built by Kowoj, who asserted their identity and earlier (Late/Terminal Classic) ties to the site by reusing carved monuments. “Blended” assemblage Group C is more difficult to parse, but reflects cosmo-calendrical principles of statecraft and the builders’ and users’ broader ties to Mayapan and Topoxte.

### Resúmen

La arquitectura de mampostería cívico-ceremonial maya de las tierras bajas del Posclásico Tardío aparece en dos configuraciones principales, grupos ceremoniales básicos y conjuntos de templos, identificados por primera vez en Mayapan, Yucatan, Mexico. Alrededor de los lagos de Peten central (Guatemala), los dos complejos arquitectónicos han estado vinculados a inmigrantes itza y kowoj, respectivamente, y sus distribuciones mapean el control variable sobre las poblaciones de los lagos por parte de estas dos etnopolíticas. Los conjuntos de templos exhiben una variación considerable en sus componentes y sus disposiciones estructurales en sitios de las tierras bajas, pero no han sido estudiados comparativamente. Aquí, examinamos 14 conjuntos de templos en 12 sitios de las tierras bajas. Consideramos que uno de los dos conjuntos en Zacpeten (Sak Peten), Grupo A, fue construido por los Kowoj haciendo una declaración sobre su identidad y su función, como también se ve en los artefactos. Los constructores del Grupo A afirmaron enlaces anteriores (Clásico Tardío/Terminal) con el sitio mediante la reutilización de monumentos tallados, así como con Tikal. El conjunto “combinado” del Grupo C es más difícil de analizar, pero refleja ideales cosmo-calendáricos del arte de gobernar y los vínculos más amplios de los constructores y usuarios con Mayapan y Topoxte.

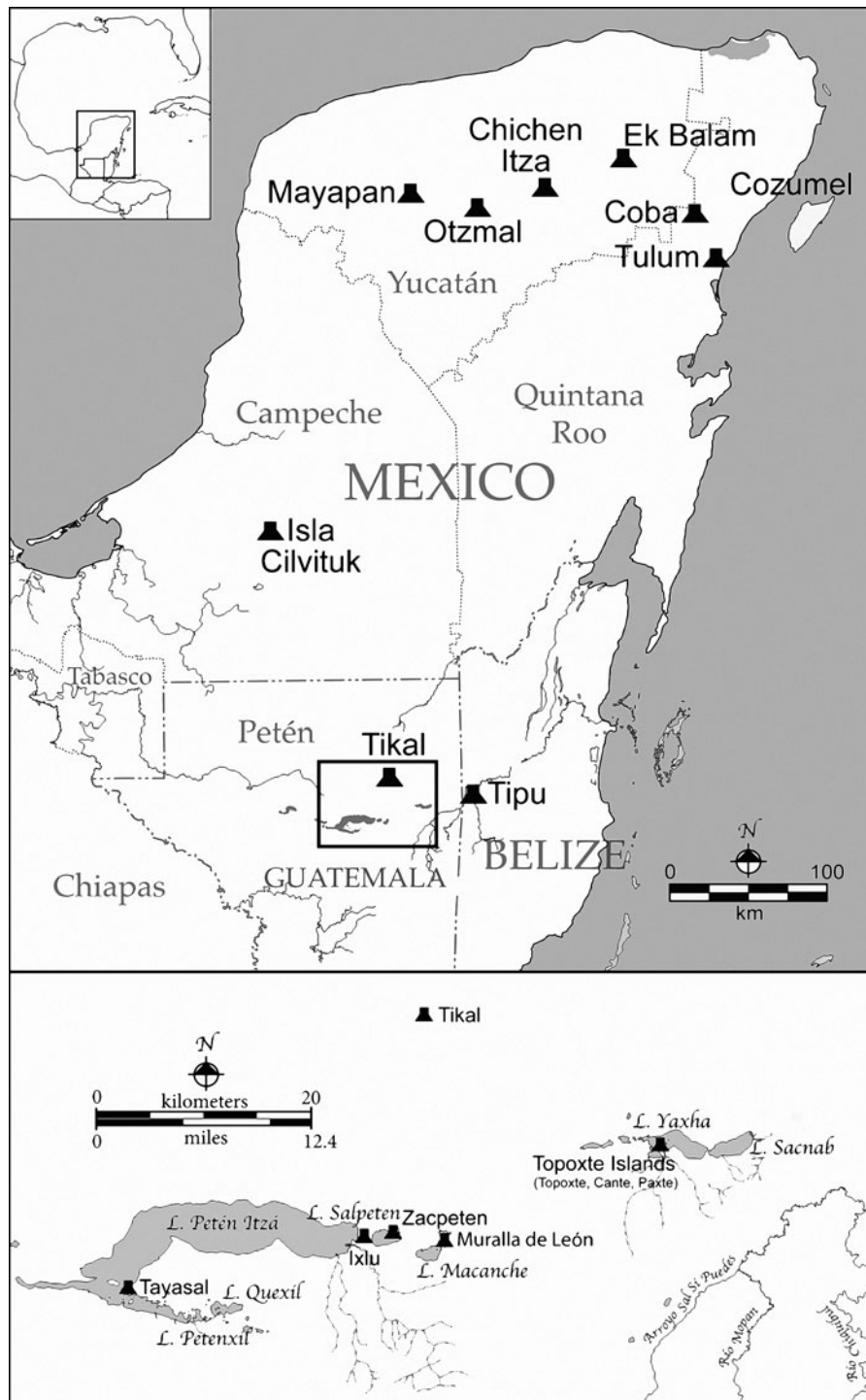
**Keywords:** Lowland Maya; Late Postclassic; temple assemblage; Zacpeten

Late Postclassic (ca. A.D. 1200/1300–1525) civic-ceremonial architecture in the Maya Lowlands (Figure 1, top) is best known in the northern Yucatan Peninsula, particularly at Mayapan. The center of a political confederacy, Mayapan was coruled—not always amicably—by two broad lineage alliances, Itza and (Tutul) Xiw. After protracted conflicts, the Xiws overthrew the Itzas around 1440–1450, and the city was abandoned. Many residents fled to the central lakes area of what is now the Department of Peten, northern Guatemala, bringing their signature architecture with them. That architecture appears in two arrangements: temple assemblages (four or more structures) and basic ceremonial groups (three structures).

Here, our interest is in the lakes area, settled by Itza and Xiw-allied Kowoj immigrants from the north: specifically, the site of Zacpeten (Sak Peten) and its two temple assemblages. Most sites with this iconic grouping (other than Mayapan) have only one. To try to explain the two assemblages at Zacpeten, we summarize the complex, local, socio-geo-political context of the Late Postclassic lakes area, then move to the broader ambit of the monumental architecture of the northern and southern lowlands. This includes the kinds and functions of the structures, and the artifacts and contexts within them. Our prior work around the lakes indicated that the two architectural arrangements can be more precisely described as “politico-ritual” (rather than “civic-ceremonial”), because they are linked to distinct ethno-political groups. Temple assemblages may incorporate calendrical/cosmological beliefs and sacred numbers, reflected, for example, in numbers of steps in stairways and artifacts in the structures.

**Corresponding author:** Prudence M. Rice, [pmrice2947@gmail.com](mailto:pmrice2947@gmail.com)

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**Figure 1.** Top: the Maya Lowlands showing sites mentioned in text: (bottom) the central Peten lakes area. Lake Sacpuy lies to the west (left) of Lake Peten Itza, off the map.

### Culture-historical background: The central Peten Late Postclassic

The central Peten lacustrine district (Figure 1, bottom), with its east-west chain of eight lakes, was wracked by conflict during the Late Postclassic and contact (A.D. 1525–1700) periods. Two Maya ethno-linguistico-political groups dominated the area: Itzas in the basins of Lakes Peten Itza and

Sacpuy to the west, and peoples we call Kowoj in the east around Lake Yaxha. Speaking Itzaj and Yukateko, respectively—mutually intelligible languages of the Yukatekan branch of the Mayan language family (Hofling 2017)—both groups were immigrants affiliated with the northern alliances. Archival studies revealed their seesawing control over the lakes' communities, as well as pervasive factionalism within and between them (Jones 1998, 2009; Rice 2019).

Archaeologically, their settlements can be distinguished by differences in pottery and politico-ritual architecture (Rice and Rice 2009, 2018).

The Postclassic Itzas in Yucatan and their leading Kokom lineage are long known from Indigenous writings and Spanish sources. In Peten, epigraphic studies divulged an early Itza history dating from Classic times (A.D. 200–950; Boot 1995, 1997). The northern chronicles (books of the *chilam balam*) tell of late migrations of Itzas south to the Peten forests, where in 1697, the Itza ruler Ajaw Kan Ek' claimed relatives in Chichen Itza (Jones 1998:11, 430, n22).

The Kowoj (Couohs) were among several northern lineages affiliated with the Xiws. A Kowoj noble was “guardian of the east gate” of Mayapan’s wall, according to the *Chilam Balam of Chumayel* (Roys 1962 [1933]:79). Structure Y45a, an elite residence near the south-southeastern periphery of the city, might have housed members of a Kowoj or allied lineage (Peraza Lope and Masson 2014a:136–145). We do not know when Kowoj first migrated south into Peten to settle on the Topoxte Islands in Lake Yaxha, but their movements were likely impelled and extended by multiple “push” factors: decades of Xiw unrest (beginning ca. 1380–1400) leading to overthrow (1440–1450) of the Itzas at Mayapan; Spanish contact and conquest; the Itzas’ 1536 retaliatory massacre of Xiw rain priests at Otzmal (Tozzer 1966 [1941]:54, n270); and the 1542 Xiw conversion to Christianity, prompting dissenters to flee. In the absence of surnames, we refer to them all as “Kowoj” after the patronym of those in Peten who told the Spaniards following the 1697 conquest of the Itzas that they had emigrated from Mayapan when the Europeans arrived in the early 1500s (Jones 1998:430, n24).

### Postclassic structure types and arrangements

Lowland Postclassic masonry architecture includes four major structure types: hall, shrine, oratory, and temple (Figure 2; Proskouriakoff 1962). A hall, the most common, is a narrow rectangular structure, typically with a long, open front (open hall) or partially open front with wood or stone columns (colonnaded hall) creating doorways and supporting the roof. Sometimes, two halls are aligned parallel to each other to form a single “tandem hall.” The front room, usually colonnaded, has low masonry benches around the interior back and side walls, forming C or L shapes. In Yucatan, the colonnaded front room was a “patio” (*tancabal*) or anteroom, an important space for gatherings and ceremonies (Restall 2001:341). Halls have been considered residences, men’s houses, or council houses / *popol najs*.

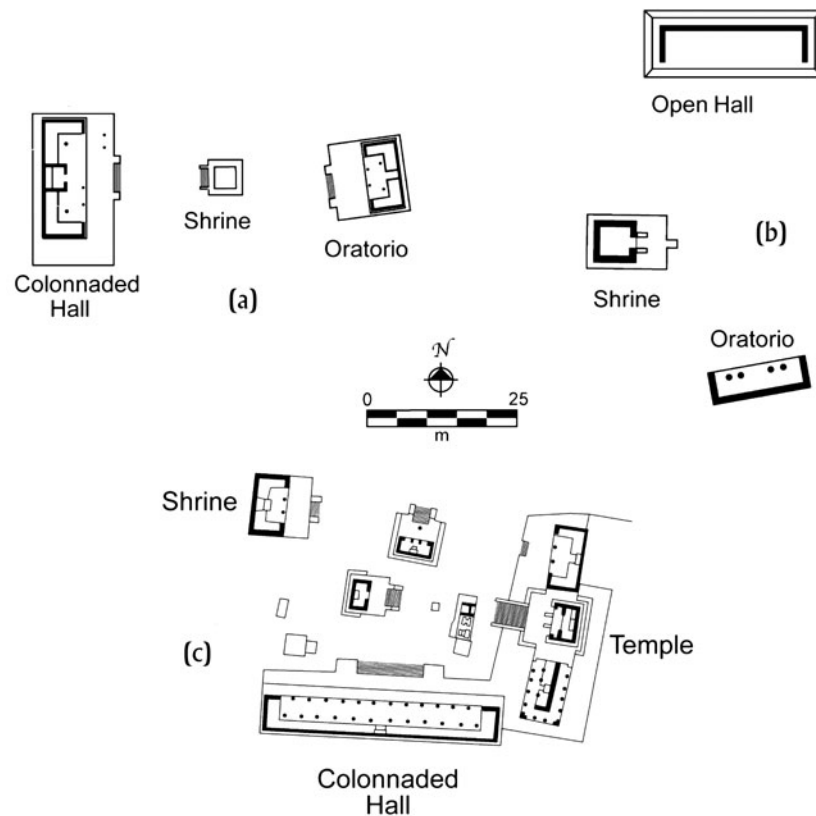
A shrine is a small edifice, typically with an altar in the back (Smith 1962:222; Smith 1971:vol. 1, pp. 108–109). Shrines may sit upon a 1–2 m high substructure (raised shrine) and have columns, benches, and partitions. Small group shrines in the plaza, often facing the oratory, house caches and utilitarian pottery (Smith 1971: vol. 2: Table 15); still smaller shrines or altars may have served individual devotions (Lorenzen 2005).

An oratory is a medium-sized, one-room, temple-like building, with a rear altar and bench, set toward the back

of its substructure (Proskouriakoff 1962:90–91, 127). Proposed functions of Mayapan’s 58 oratories were drawn from Fray Diego de Landa’s (Tozzer 1966 [1941]:108, 108–109, n497) observation that “the lords, priests and the leading men” had chapel-like family oratories and idols in their houses for private prayers and ancestor veneration (Peraza Lope and Masson 2014b:73; Proskouriakoff 1962:90–91; Smith 1962:220–221). Often housing burials and caches, Mayapan oratories had multiple variants. One version was characterized by “ceremonial” pottery: censers, cups, effigy vessels, figurines, drums, masks, and nonlocal wares (Smith 1971:vol. 1, pp. 107–108; 1971:vol. 2:Table 14). Others vary architecturally, having benches, medial features, and burials, with two “central” variants and two in residential groups (Pugh 2003a).

These structures occur in two configurations: basic ceremonial groups and temple assemblages (Proskouriakoff 1962:90–91, 127–129; Smith 1962). At Mayapan, the three structures in the basic ceremonial group (BCG; Figure 2a–b) are commonly aligned by their transverse axes—oratory and hall facing each other with the shrine between them facing the hall. Peten BCGs are more variable, often non-aligned and nonaxial. The addition of a temple creates a temple assemblage (Figures 2c, 3). A temple is a one- or two-room edifice, with columns creating multiple entrances, surmounting a large, stepped, pyramidal substructure that has an approximately square footprint and a stairway that may be balustraded. Structures in the assemblage are typically arranged cardinaly, creating an open plaza or court. A statue shrine—a small, low, elongated platform—may sit in front of the temple holding stucco figures, pottery incensarios, or offerings. (Note that William Ringle and George Bey [2001] define northern temple assemblages more broadly and include many Terminal Classic and Early Postclassic arrangements [e.g., at Ek Balam, Chichen Itza]. These may be antecedents of the Late Postclassic complexes). At Mayapan, temple columns and/or balustrades may be carved as serpents with large, open-jawed heads, creating a serpent temple. The large Itzmal Ch’en group (Figure 3k), 2 km east-northeast of the Mayapan center, exhibits an unusual “blended” or hybrid style combining a BCG and a temple assemblage, with temple and oratory melded into a single edifice on the north side of the complex (Proskouriakoff 1962:127–129).

Late Postclassic temple assemblages in Peten can be seen as iterations of the long-lived “temple on the east” tradition in the southern lowlands, which begins in the Preclassic with E Groups. E Groups (see Freidel et al. 2017) consist of a tripart eastern structure, often housing interments, centering a western pyramid. They may be precursors of Tikal’s Classic residential Plaza Plan 2 (PP2): four structures around a *plazuela*, with a tall pyramid, square in plan, and typically housing burials, in the east (Becker 1971). One PP2 at Tikal (Group 2C-XVIII, north of the Bejucal Reservoir; Becker 2004:Figure 1e) even maintains the E Group’s tripart platform—an eastern mound with north and south “wings”—as does Structure 1 of the Tulum temple assemblage and temple structure Q-143 at Mayapan. Peten Postclassic temple assemblages elaborated the eastern



**Figure 2.** Postclassic structure types and groups: (a, b) basic ceremonial group; (c) temple assemblage, southern part of Chen Mul group at Mayapan (compare with Figure 3i; northern colonnaded hall is omitted for space reasons).

structure into the eponymous temple, with the oratory on its north side.

Late Postclassic temple assemblages are found widely in the lowlands (Figure 1, top; Figure 3). In the north, they are at Coba and Tulum (Quintana Roo), San Gervasio (Cozumel Island), and Isla Cilvituk (Campeche)—the latter also having a BCG (Alexander 2005:170). In the south, several are found around the Peten lakes: Topoxte Island in Lake Yaxha (Rice 1986:316), Muralla de León (Lake Macanche basin; Bracken 2023; Rice and Rice 1981), Zacpeten (Lake Salpeten; Pugh 2001; Rice 1986), and Ixlu (Rice and Rice 2016:61–66). One assemblage was also built at Tipu in western Belize (Jones et al. 1986).

### Late Postclassic temple assemblages at Tipu and central Peten

Archaeologists in the northern lowlands have been cautious about tying BCGs and temple assemblages to specific lineages or alliances (Peraza Lope and Masson 2014b:51–52). Ringle and Bey (2001:286) suggested that BCGs may have been associated with the western peninsula and the Xiws, whereas temple assemblages—especially groupings with serpent temples—could be attributed to the Itzas/Kokoms. We, however, suggest different affiliations. The Mayapan Ch'en Mul temple assemblage (Figure 3i) may have been a Xiw complex (Pugh 2003b:417; Ringle and Bey 2001:286) and the Itzmal Ch'en blended group (Figure 3k) as well. The latter, located near

the Kowoj-guarded eastern Gate H, might have been a Kowoj ceremonial-administrative compound (Pugh 2003b).

In central Peten, temple assemblages are common in the eastern lake basins, and we identify them as architectonic signatures of the Xiw-related Kowoj polity centered at Lake Yaxha (Pugh 2001; Rice 1986:316; Rice and Rice 2009). We consider BCGs to be Itza complexes, given their frequency around Lake Peten Itza: three at Ixlu (Rice and Rice 2016:65–77), one at Tayasal, and others at small sites on the northern shore (Pugh and Shiratori 2018:247).

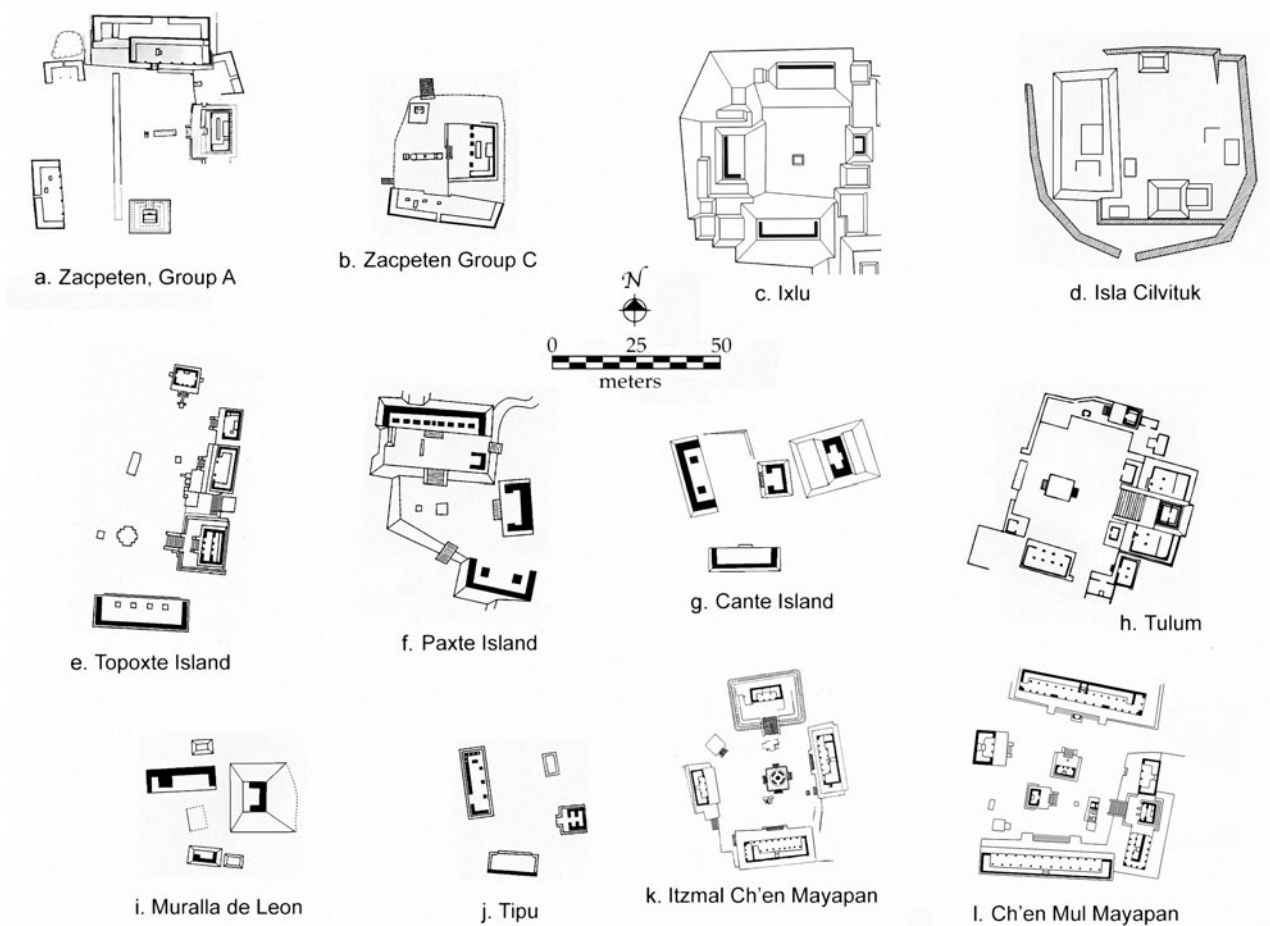
### Tipu, Belize

Tipu, in western Belize on the Macal River, 35 km east of Topoxte, interacted closely with both Itzas and Kowojs in the Postclassic period. Its temple assemblage (Figure 3j) comprised four structures on a 3 m high platform over Late and Terminal Classic construction. The eastern temple had a two-room superstructure with a slate slab or stela in the front doorway. The oratory, north of the temple, had been terminated, and its facing stones had been removed. A colonnaded hall and an open hall with a small shrine in front completed the complex. Tipu became a Spanish frontier *visita* mission in the sixteenth century (Graham 2011; Jones et al. 1986).

### Lakes Macanche and Salpeten

Muralla de León is a small site on the eastern edge of Lake Macanche enclosed by a 4 m high, dry-laid Preclassic stone





**Figure 3.** Examples of Late Postclassic civic-ceremonial groupings discussed in text: (a, c, d, e, h, i, j, l) temple assemblages; (b, k) blended assemblage; (f) basic ceremonial group; (g) blended? BCG?

wall, with a temple assemblage (Figure 3i) at its highest elevation (Bracken 2023; Rice and Rice 1981). The assemblage has a large eastern temple, a hall on the north, a shrine on the south, and three other small structures. The temple's size and the lack of a separate oratory suggest a blended composition.

The temple assemblage at Ixlu (Figure 3c), on the isthmus between Lakes Peten Itza and Salpeten in Itza territory, is the westernmost of these complexes (Rice and Rice 2016:61–66). The small eastern temple has nine steps, and the oratory lies to its south rather than its north. The western raised shrine has two fragments of plain stelae incorporated into its walls. Ixlu also has two BCGs in its large Main Plaza, one of which is an unusual “dual” complex with two structure pairs—shrine and oratorio—facing a single, large, open hall on the north.

#### Lake Yaxha and Topoxte

The three Topoxte Islands in Lake Yaxha—Topoxte, Cante, and Paxte—played largely unexamined roles in Late Postclassic Peten. The ritual architecture of Cante and Paxte (Figure 3f–g) is difficult to classify, particularly that of the former (Johnson 1985). Topoxte Island has a temple

assemblage (Figure 3e) with a temple, shrine, hall, and two oratorios, but no western structure. A carved stone serpent head, perhaps originally mounted in the temple balustrade, was reused as a block in a low platform in front of the temple (Wurster, ed. 2000). Construction began around A.D. 1200, with a second phase in 1350–1375 (Hermes 2000d:295–296). Three dates from a midden in the Structure E oratorio were interpreted as indicating final ritual activities and abandonment around A.D. 1450–1475 (Wurster and Hermes 2000:249). However, the  $2\sigma$  ranges of these samples (Table 1) extend from A.D. 1432 to 1636, providing no support for that interpretation and instead suggesting a much later date.

The event(s) precipitating abandonment are unknown, but there may have been some internal factionalism. Early excavations at Cante Island yielded 37 sherds of the Itzas' Snail-Inclusion Paste (SIP) ceramic ware (Rice 1979:64–68), a relatively large number considering that later excavations on all three islands recovered the same total (Hermes 2000a:165, 196). In addition, a distinctive hybrid type displays characteristic Kowoj red-painted decoration on Itza SIP ware plates. These hint at an early version of a later Kowoj–Itza alliance, known to have involved the western Chak'an faction of the Itzas. With the carved stone serpent

**Table 1.** Calibrated A.D. radiocarbon dates on charcoal from Structure E, Topoxte Island.<sup>a</sup>

SAMPLE ID	CONVENTIONAL AGE	CAL DATE	CAL 1σ RANGE	CAL 2σ RANGE
BlN 4741	384 ± 41	1488	1448–1521	1440–1533
			1587–1524 [sic.]	1543–1636
BlN 4742	407 ± 37	1452, 1463, 1469	1440–1499	1432–1527
			1512–1516	1559–1630
BlN 4743	406 ± 39	1452, 1462, 1471	1440–1501	1432–1529
			1510–1516	1557–1632
			1598–1619	
		Range of ranges	1440–1619	1432–1636
		Range of means	1491–1528	1494–1581

<sup>a</sup>Source: Wurster and Hermes 2000:249. Note: The authors do not give percent probabilities for these dates, identifying the 1σ and 2σ ranges as probabilities.

head in Topoxte's temple assemblage, this pottery prompted consideration of Cante as a possible enclave-like (Chak'an?) Itza settlement (Rice 2019).

Whatever the upheaval, groups or factions of Kowoj advanced westward from Lake Yaxha, challenging the Itzas at the edges of their territory. They usurped Itza sites around the lakes (including Zacpeten and as far west as Ixlu), eventually settling the north shore of Lake Peten Itza and precipitating or exacerbating warfare. By the early contact period, the Kowoj dominated the lacustrine zone (Rice and Rice 2009). But between 1630 and 1660, the Itzas exacted revenge, advancing eastward, taking over Kowoj towns, and fomenting rebellion in new Spanish missions in Belize, perhaps aiming to regain control over the Belize River valley trade (Jones 1998:52–58).

### Zacpeten

The site of Zacpeten / Sak Peten (Figure 4) occupies a small peninsula extending from the northeast shore of Lake Salpeten, with settlement beginning in the Middle Preclassic period. In the Late Classic period, a son of Tikal's *k'ujul ajaw* (divine king) ruled Sak Peten and married a local woman (Beliaev et al. 2017:147), which probably explains the presence of a twin pyramid group. The peninsula's northern end was fortified with a canal and several walls, likely during the Terminal Classic period, effectively making Zacpeten an island (Rice et al. 2009:133–135). A recent lidar survey revealed construction north of these defensive works (Figure 5)—a platform, causeway, and an east–west ballcourt, also likely dating to the Late or Terminal Classic periods—which we call “Zacpeten North.”

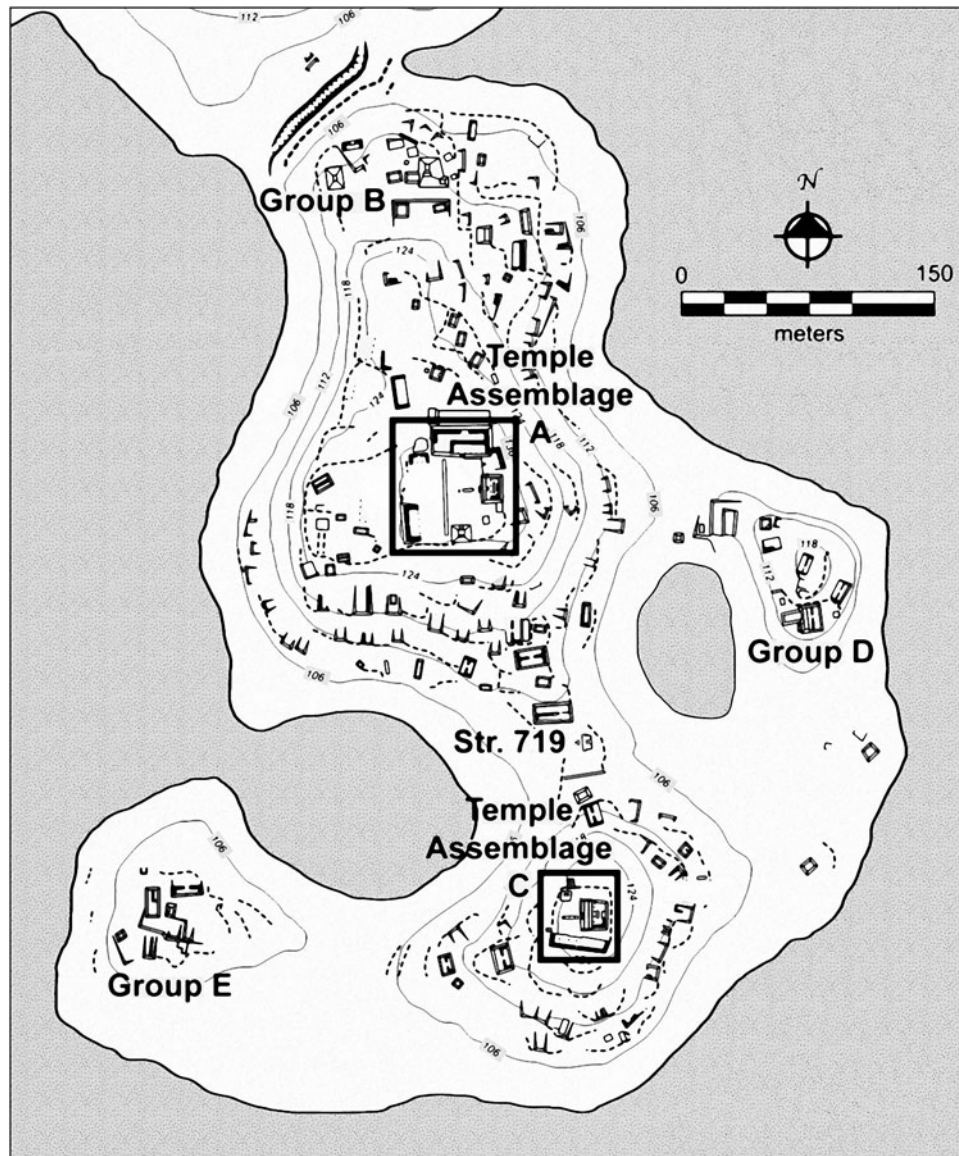
Zacpeten's two temple assemblages, Groups A and C, crown hilltops about 28 m above lake level. Between these groups is a tandem hall, Structure 719, an elite domicile modified to serve as a council house or *popol naj*, with an adjacent temple or oratory and altar (Rice et al. 2018). Two elite residential compounds, Groups D and E, characterized by tandem halls, occupy low rises in the southwest and east sides of the peninsula. Some 137 domestic structures are scattered over the peninsula and on the terraced

southern and eastern slopes below the assemblages. A Late Postclassic population of 750–1,400 persons is estimated, if all nonritual structures were occupied contemporaneously. In 1696, Zacpeten was one of five villages—along with Chaltuna (Ixlu) and “Maconche”—in an Itza administrative district called a *b'atab'il*.

*Temple Assemblage Group A.* Test excavations in Group A (Figure 3a; Pugh 2001:227–361), in the center of the peninsula, revealed underlying Middle and Late Preclassic (900/800 B.C.–A.D. 200) construction. The hilltop was subsequently deserted until the Late Classic period, when it was modified into a PP2 configuration, and then overbuilt by a dual Early Postclassic BCG. In the early fourteenth century, the eastern BCG was overbuilt by the temple assemblage; the western side retains two standing BCG buildings— oratory and hall—and excavations revealed a demolished structure, assumed to be its shrine. The division between eastern and western sectors is marked by a low “linear feature” 45 m long (north–south) and 2.5 m wide, perhaps the foundation for a perishable partition.

Constructed on a 1.8 m high platform, Group A's main structures include an eastern temple, oratory, colonnaded tandem hall, raised shrine, elongated statue shrine, plus other small shrines or altars. The builders conspicuously asserted connections to Zacpeten's Classic heritage: some structure foundations were aligned with underlying buildings, and spolia—Classic monuments and dressed stones—were prominently set into structure facades. Both halves of Terminal Classic carved Altar 1 (Figure 6) and a fragment of plain Stela 5 were embedded into the hall's basal platform. Stela 4, set into the east side of the raised shrine, dates to the 9.19.10.0.0 (A.D. 820) half-katun and identifies the community as “Sak Peten” (Beliaev et al. 2017:147). Plain Stela 3 was found broken in front.

*Temple Assemblage Group C.* Group C (Figure 3b; Pugh 2001:362–424), 250 m south of Group A, was built over Middle Preclassic construction and more than 2 m of mixed fills. Construction was roughly coeval with Group A in the fourteenth century (Table 2). It is considered a blended assemblage with three main structures: a large eastern temple, an open hall in the south, and a raised



**Figure 4.** The peninsular site of Zacpeten (Sak Peten) in Lake Salpeten, showing its structural groups and defensive complex.

shrine in the north, plus an elongated statue shrine and a small altar/shrine in front of the temple. The western side lacks architectural definition. The typical oratory position north of and adjacent to the temple was occupied by a platform 1.7 m high over a bedrock outcrop. It had no permanent masonry superstructure, although two postholes in the rock could have been associated with a perishable construction. Group C is considerably smaller than Group A, but the temple is about 60 percent larger than the Group A temple. Classic dressed stones were reused, but no monuments were set into facades.

Group C is noteworthy for the counts of steps in its stairways: of the two accessing the plaza from below, the one on the north has 20 steps, and the one on the southwest has nine; 13 steps lead up to the temple from the plaza (Pugh 2001:391). Recall the nine steps to the Ixlu temple. These numbers are significant in Maya calendrics and cosmology: nine levels/lords of the Underworld; 13 numerical prefixes

of day names in the 260-day sacred almanac, 13 “months” in that almanac, 13 katuns in a 260-tun Katun Cycle, and 13 celestial levels; and 20 day names, days in a *winal* (“month”), tuns (“years”) in a katun, and katuns in a *bak’tun*.

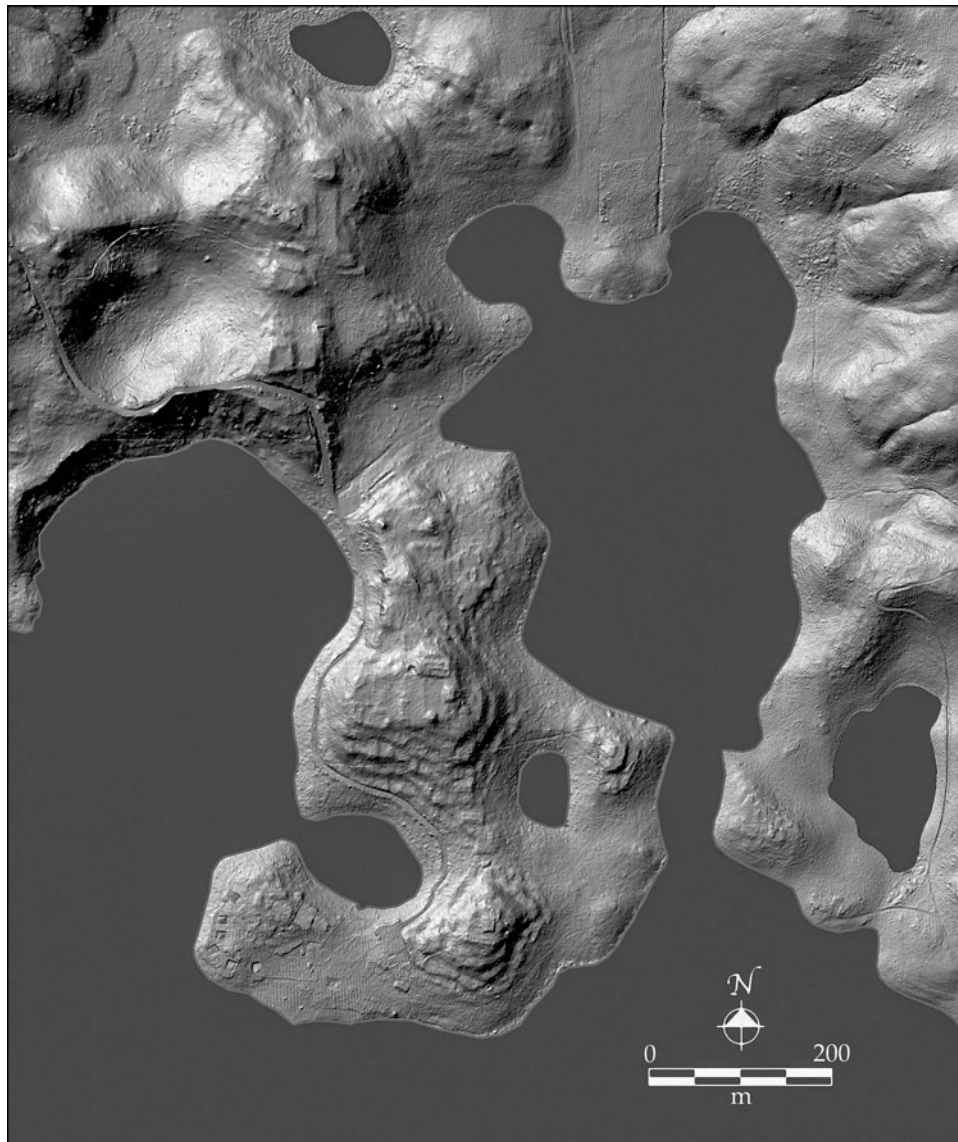
### Temple assemblage variations

A review of Late Postclassic temple assemblages reveals significant variability in structure placement, presence/absence of oratories, plaza sizes, and deposits of human remains.

### Numbers and placement of structures

Temple assemblages are typically constructed on approximately 2 m high platforms, with the temple in the east and other buildings at the cardinal directions. Variations are seen particularly in the number and placement of halls and shrines (Table 3). The assemblages of Zacpeten





**Figure 5.** Lidar image of Zacpeten (peninsula) and the newly discovered structures of Zacpeten North on the adjacent mainland (courtesy of the National Center for Airborne Laser Mapping).

Group A, Topoxte Island, Ixlu, and San Gervasio (Cozumel) have four (or more) main structures. The Paxte Island (Figure 3f), Muralla de León (Figure 3i), and Zacpeten Group C complexes lack a structure on the west, as do Topoxte Island and Tulum (Figure 3h); that side is bounded by the edge of the substructural platform. San Gervasio has only a platform on the (north)east. At Coba, the Las Pinturas Group is a possible temple assemblage, with a temple, oratorio, colonnaded hall, and 13 altars.

#### *Oratories and plaza sizes*

The Postclassic assemblages of the Peten lakes (including Tipu) and Mayapan (Table 4) differ in the presence/absence of an oratory and in plaza size. Oratories typically lie in the east, immediately north of the temples, with their substructures contiguous, but they are especially diverse:

- Two at Topoxte Island (Hermes 2000c:60–63, Figure 44)
- Questionable at Paxte and Cante Islands
- Platforms without superstructures at Ixlu and Zacpeten Group C
- Melded with temple at Muralla de León (blended assemblage)
- Partially dismantled at Tipu
- South of temple at Ixlu

At Mayapan, multiple oratory variants were distinguished by pottery and architecture.

As for assemblage sizes, estimates suggest a bimodal distribution: some less than 900 m<sup>2</sup> in area and others ranging between 1,275 and 1,800 m<sup>2</sup> (Table 4). The orthogonal positioning of major structures creates a plaza or court: open spaces for people to gather for meetings or to participate in rituals affirming group solidarity or celebrating leaders,





**Figure 6.** Broken Zacpeten Altar I (reconstructed photographically), dated 10.1.0.0.0 (A.D. 849), its halves reset in the facade of hall Structure 606 in Group A.

ancestors, or supernaturals (see Restall 2001:341, 344–347; Ringle and Bey 2001:276–279). Complexes enclosed by buildings on all four sides restrict public access. Those with only three aligned structures, such as BCGs, may lack plazas or such public spaces are fairly small and unenclosed, which means that they permit unrestricted access but accommodate smaller groups. For the assembled, low halls allow a view of the activities inside, whereas temples, oratories, and raised shrines—situated on elevated substructures accessed by narrow stairways—tend to limit visual participation.

#### Human remains

Temple assemblages incorporate both funerary and sacrificial interments. Although Mayapan shrines did not have

special mortuary functions, they often held burial cists “crammed with skeletal remains but devoid of offerings” (Proskouriakoff 1962:133). Twelve (30 percent) of the 40 residential (nonvaulted) burials that were excavated by the Carnegie Project were in oratories, nine of which were multiple interments (Smith 1962:254). This reinforces these buildings’ suggested familial/ancestral functions. Mass burials were found in two “burial shaft temples”: Structure Q-58 in the northwest corner of the Main Group and Q-95 (Temple of the Fisherman) in the northeast corner. A shallow deposit over stairs on the southwestern edge of the Itzmal Ch’en group platform held the remains of at least 20 individuals, who were disarticulated and burned (Paris et al. 2017; Peraza Lope and Masson 2014a:127). At Las Pinturas, Coba, the postcranial skeleton of an adolescent was found in a stone crypt west of the 13 altars, and two skulls lay outside it (Folan et al. 1983:75).

At Zacpeten, a headless individual was buried prone, with the legs bent as if “hog-tied” (the arms did not appear to have been tied), in the temple-oratory of Group C. Another interment was in the colonnaded hall on the south. Group A included three individuals in the temple and a Late Classic burial under the north hall, as well as a mass grave in a borrow pit at its northwest corner (Duncan 2005:110–121, 2009; Pugh 2001:279–286). This long-used pit, excavated as Operation 1000, held the largely disarticulated remains of at least 37 individuals—adults and juveniles, males and females—deposited without grave goods in a single event with an associated Late Postclassic TPQ date of cal A.D. 1389–1437 (Table 2). The remains are believed to represent the secondary interment of sacrificial victims originally buried under the shrine of the Early Postclassic Itza western BCG (excavated as Operation 1001).

At Topoxte Island, a headless individual was also buried in the main temple but in a flexed position on its side (Acevedo 2000:105). The bones of dismembered bodies of adults and children were mixed with stone and earth fill of a low (30–50 cm high) platform on the western edge of

**Table 2.** Radiocarbon dates (cal A.D.; 2σ% probability) for Zacpeten and Topoxte temple assemblages.

ZACPETEN GROUP A <sup>a</sup>			ZACPETEN GROUP C <sup>a</sup>			TOPOXTE ISLAND <sup>e</sup>	
Location	Range	Prob	Location	Range	Prob	Location	Range
Temple 602 <sup>b</sup>	1306–1367	40	Temple 764	1299–1419	100	Last construction <sup>f</sup>	1350–1375
	1383–1441	60				Str. E abandonment	1342–1636
Op. 1000 <sup>c</sup>	1321–1352	26					
	1389–1437	74					
Op. 1001 above lower floor <sup>d</sup>	1037–1227	98					
	1232–1240	2					

Note: Postclassic date calibrations are bimodal.

<sup>a</sup>Pugh 2001:Table 1-1.

<sup>b</sup>From incense in a midden.

<sup>c</sup>Date from hardwood charcoal under the human remains (Pugh 2001:284).

<sup>d</sup>Date from burned clay, late Early Postclassic debris incorporated into Late Postclassic floor ballast dated by pottery (Pugh 2001:289).

<sup>e</sup>Wurster and Hermes 2000. See Table 5 in the text below (following).

<sup>f</sup>Hermes 2000d:296.

**Table 3.** Temple assemblage structures and their cardinal directional positions.

SITE	POSITION OF STRUCTURES AROUND PLAZA					
	EAST	NORTH	NORTHEAST	SOUTH	WEST	CENTER
Mayapan <sup>a</sup>	Temple <sup>c</sup>	Colonnaded hall	Oratory	Colonnaded hall	Raised shrine	Shrines
Mayapan <sup>b</sup>	Colonnaded hall	Oratory/Temple	--	Colonnaded hall	Oratory	Shrine <sup>d</sup>
Tulum	Temple	Shrine?	?	Colonnaded hall	?	Shrine?
Coba	Temple & Oratory <sup>e</sup>	Colonnaded hall	--	--	--	13 altars
Tipu	Temple	--	Damaged	Hall?	Colonnaded Hall	?
Muralla de León	Temple <sup>f</sup>	Hall	--	Shrine?	--	Statue shrine?
Topoxte	Temple <sup>c</sup>	Shrine	2 Oratories	Colonnaded Hall	--	Shrine
Cante Island <sup>g</sup>	Oratory/Temple	--	--	Colonnaded hall	Hall?	Shrine
Paxte Island <sup>h</sup>	Oratory?	Colonnaded hall	--	?	--	2 shrines
Zacpeten A	Temple	Double hall	Oratory	Raised shrine	Linear feature	2 shrines
Zacpeten C <sup>f</sup>	Temple/Oratory	Shrine	Platform <sup>i</sup>	Hall	--	2/4 shrines
Ixlu	Temple	Hall	No <sup>j</sup>	Colonnaded Hall	Shrine	Statue shrine
Isla Cilvituk <sup>k</sup>	?	?	?	Temple	Colonnaded hall	--
San Gervasio <sup>l</sup>	Platform	Temple, oratory?		Oratory?, hall	--	Shrine

<sup>a</sup>Chen Mul temple assemblage (Peraza Lope and Masson 2014b:Figure 2.10).

<sup>b</sup>Izmal Ch'en blended group (Proskouriakoff 1962:Figure 1).

<sup>c</sup>Serpent temple.

<sup>d</sup>Circular shrine on a radial platform (*adoratorio*). Three other small constructions are also present.

<sup>e</sup>Oratory lies at foot of temple stairs on west (front) face.

<sup>f</sup>Complex has a large combined temple and oratory.

<sup>g</sup>Lacks an oratory.

<sup>h</sup>Likely a BCG rather than temple assemblage (Table 4).

<sup>i</sup>A platform was present, but no permanent superstructure was evident.

<sup>j</sup>The oratory lies immediately south of the temple; this may also be true of Tulum.

<sup>k</sup>This assemblage is not well published, and structure functions are tentative (Alexander 1998, 2005:Figure 10.3).

<sup>l</sup>Structures in this "plaza group" C22-4 are oriented intercardinally, hence the question marks (Freidel and Sabloff 1984:Figure 22). The oratory is located north (roughly northeast) of the temple, and some structures are thought to be residential.

the plaza (Bullard 1970:267). Was this mass grave related to the temple assemblage—dedication? Remodeling? Abandonment? In later excavations on the island, remains of 100 individuals were identified in 61 burials. Of these, 51 were Postclassic, and eight were single skulls (Acevedo 2000:Figure 88). Three skulls were also recovered on Cante Island (Rice 1986:278). Skull burial was an Itza practice in Peten.

### Zacpeten temple assemblage paraphernalia and performances

The functions of politico-ritual architecture are revealed by the artifacts and contexts of deposition as well as the architecture itself, making it worthwhile to review this material. (Because many discussions of temple assemblages lack structure-by-structure details of artifact content, this section is largely limited to Zacpeten.) At Zacpeten, as at Mayapan, pottery was the most abundant category of ritual paraphernalia in Groups A and C, especially incense burners. Fragments commonly lay in the open western (front) half of the temples near the columns, suggesting use where the ritual specialists could be viewed by an audience in the plaza below. Other broken objects in the temples were recovered between the medial and rear altars and wall where, deeper in the

interior (east side) and out of sight, they were handled by ritual officiants.

#### Incense burners

Postclassic incensarios fall into two main categories: effigy and composite. Both are vases of varying shapes and proportions. Effigy censers have anthropomorphic effigies attached to the front. Effigy censers were associated only with monumental architecture, whereas composite censers are also found in residences. Some of the objects the Spaniards called "idols" and "statues" likely refer to censers, especially effigies (see Tozzer 1966 [1941]:110–111, n502–505). In Yucatan, some hollow statues held the ashes of cremated relatives and were kept in oratories with remodeled skulls of the deceased for ancestor veneration (Landa in Tozzer 1966 [1941]:131, 131, n512).

The Peten lakes incense burner typology was based on form and clay paste ware, which permitted calculation of minimum numbers of individual (MNI) censers. Because the same paste wares used for serving vessels were also used for censers, they are diagnostic of production source. *Ídolos Modeled* censers, for example, are made of the Kowojs' distinctive Clemencia Cream Paste ware (CCP), which

**Table 4.** Categories and sizes of temple assemblages.

SITE	MAIN STRUCTURES	ORATORY in NE?	PLAZA SIZE (m <sup>2</sup> ) <sup>c</sup>	GROUPING TYPE
Mayapan <sup>a</sup>	4	Yes	1,432	Temple assemblage
Mayapan <sup>b</sup>	4	--	1,275	Blended <sup>d</sup>
Tipu	3+1	Damaged	679	Temple assemblage
Topoxte Is.	5	Yes (n = 2)	1,796	Temple assemblage
Cante Is.	4	--	884	BCG? Blended? <sup>d,e</sup>
Paxte Is.	3	--	578	BCG? <sup>e</sup>
Muralla de León	3	--	314	Blended <sup>d</sup>
Zacp. A	4	Yes	1,350 <sup>f</sup>	Temple assemblage
Zacp. C	3	Platform	362	Blended <sup>d</sup>
Ixlu	4+	No	628	Temple assemblage
San Gervasio	8	(See text)	1,438	Blended?

<sup>a</sup>Ch'en Mul temple assemblage (see Peraza Lope and Masson 2014b:Figure 2.10).

<sup>b</sup>Itzmal Ch'en blended group (Proskouriakoff 1962:Figure 1).

<sup>c</sup>Measurements, taken from the edges of structures on published maps rather than in the field, are approximate.

<sup>d</sup>Temple assemblage with a single large structure combining temple and oratory.

<sup>e</sup>Eastern temple replaced by an oratory?

<sup>f</sup>Includes the linear feature but not the entire western BCG.

is abundant around the Topoxte Islands (Rice 1979), whereas Pitufó Modeled censers are made of the Itzas' gray-to-tan SIP ware, which is common around Lake Peten Itza.

Effigy censers differed in the supernaturals they modeled and the structures where they were recovered. At Mayapan, effigy incensarios were likely associated with what Smith (1962:267) called, without elaboration, the "organized religion of the ceremonial center," focused on Kukulcan (Quetzalcoatl). Effigies typically represent major deities such as Itzamna, the creator god, and Chaak, the rain/storm god (Milbrath and Peraza Lope 2009:189–192; Peraza Lope and Masson 2014c:438–445; Thompson 1957). At Zacpeten (Table 5), the Group A temple included five large effigy censers of Patojo Modeled type, widespread in the lakes area: two possibly representing Itzamna, one paired with a Chaak, and a male and female pair. In Group C, effigies in the temple-oratorio included a Chaak (?) effigy and a faceless female (Ixchel, his consort?). Fragments of smaller Pitufó censers, with semi-effigies of a descending or "diving god" figure (possibly God E / Maize God?) applied to the vase, were found in Group C and around the Group A oratorio and adjacent temple. This figure, associated with rain, agriculture, and abundance (López Portillo Guzmán and Esparza Olguín 2018:17), appears on Stela 5 on Flores Island, the Itza capital of Nojpeten/Tayza, and in sculpture and murals at Tulum (Miller 1974:177–179).

The Kowojs' small Ídolos effigy censers and their late Kulut Modeled copies have distinctive faces, costuming, and reptile-like or Pax monster headdresses (see Bullard 1970:278–285). Often reconstructible, they may represent lineage patrons or ancestors. In Group A, six incensarios (including an Ídolos pair) were found in the temple and oratory. A Kulut censer sat in the oratorio's medial niche, and another—probably its predecessor—lay in front of the

temple stairs, terminated and the fragments scattered. In addition, a pair of Kulut censers and fragments were found in hall Structure 606. Only two Ídolos/Kulut vessels were found in the temple-oratory in Group C.

Composite incense burners—vases with impressed fillets or appliques—had different associations. In Group A, composite censers occurred in low frequencies, partly reconstructible and their positions suggesting pairing: minimally six Extranjeras / La Justa Composite types, three to six Gotas, plus Fijate and Mumúl. They were recovered mostly outside the temple; few were in the shrines, and they were virtually absent in the oratory.

In contrast, relatively few composite censers (and none of La Justa type) were found in Group C except in the temple-oratory, with eight Gotas vessels. A *k'an* cross ("+") was incised in three Gotas censers and two in a drum of the same paste ware. This cross is a multivalent symbol referencing yellow, ripe (maize), sacrificial offerings, precious (Macri and Vail 2009:148; Stone and Zender 2011:127), and cosmic spatiotemporal order (Egan 2011); *k'an* is also a day name ("Iguana") and yearbearer in the late Mayapan calendar. Some decorated pottery, especially in Group C, was painted with yearbearer (day) graphemes—Ak'bal, Lamat, Etz'nab', and one Ajaw (Rice and Cecil 2009:245–248, 262–263)—but these are not yearbearers in the Classic or Mayapan calendars.

The censers in the two temples suggested different final ritual performances (Pugh and Rice 2009:164–165). The Group A temple appeared to have been swept clean before final rituals were held: hundreds of censer and noncenser pottery fragments, lithics, bone, and miscellaneous shell were amassed in middens flanking a stairway to the adjoining platform of the oratory. Inside, the temple's broken effigy censers, more or less in situ in pairs, were deemed to be still "alive" or ritually potent.

**Table 5.** Numbers of incense burners, by type, in Zacpeten temple assemblages.

	GROUP A <sup>a</sup>		GROUP C	
	Effigy	Comp.	Effigy	Comp.
Modeled in temple/oratorio				
Patojo <sup>b</sup>	7		8+	
Pitufo	2		1	
Ídolos	3		1	
Kulut	3		1	
Tirso	5		3	
TOTAL	20		14+	
Composite in temple/oratorio				
Extranjeras		2		2+
La Justa		4		--
Gotas		3+		8
Fijate		2		1
Mumúl		4		5
TOTAL		15+ <sup>b</sup>		16+
Elsewhere in assemblage				
Patojo	12+	~23+	12+	~14
Total assemblage	32 (36?)	38 (42?)	26 (33?) <sup>c</sup>	30 <sup>c</sup>

Note: Minimum numbers of censers were counted from fragments using paste ware as a first criterion, plus rim and base form, dimensions (diameter), effigy body attributes, and decoration (Rice 2009:280–281).

<sup>a</sup>Excluding vessels/sherds from Operations 1000 and 1001 (see text).

<sup>b</sup>No Patojo censers or composite censers in the Group A oratory.

<sup>c</sup>Mostly in the temple-oratory but also common in the raised shrine and statue shrine.

The Group C combined temple-oratory had not been cleaned after its last use and retained on its floor the terminated objects of final rituals. Censers had been smashed to deactivate their powers, and the fragments had been scattered and mixed in piles with other sherds, some showing wear and weathering. The presence of two drums and two quincunx chalices might indicate that new paraphernalia was brought in without removing the old, or perhaps the structure served not only combined temple and oratorio functions but two sets of users who supplied their own ritual objects. Perhaps it was abandoned quickly, before it could be cleaned, or the users did not follow normal post-ritual sweeping protocols. Regardless, percentages of total censers in each category in Zacpeten Groups A and C are close: 47 and 48 percent effigies, and 53 and 52 percent composite, respectively (Table 5).

At Topoxte, on-floor refuse of Ofrenda 19 in the Structure E oratory consisted of an accumulation of at least 11 composite censers (La Justa and Extranjeras Composite types) and one effigy, probably Ídolos (Hermes 2000b:Figures 67–70; also Bullard 1970:285, Figure 23). A cut-out “+” appears in the lower wall of a pottery drum. Earlier excavations in the temple yielded two partially

reconstructible effigy censers: one Ídolos Modeled with a reptilian headdress and one Patojo Modeled (Bullard 1970: Figures 18, 21a–b, 22).

At Mayapan, censers were among the “ceremonial” forms that distinguished Smith’s (1971:vol. 1, pp. 107–108; 1971:vol. 2:Table 14) two categories of oratories. Effigy censers (Chen Mul Modeled) were abundant in the Itzmal Ch’en group, including in the temple/oratorio, the mass grave (Paris et al. 2017:22–23), and the colonnaded hall (one an Itzamna effigy; Peraza Lope and Masson 2014a:Figure 3.13).

#### Other ritual paraphernalia

In both Zacpeten temples, caches were placed into the floor in front (west) of the altars. Cache bowls held copper foil, beads, and pendants of greenstone. Two caches in Group C included marine materials (Pugh 2001:Figures 8–10, 8–26): one in the temple had three shell fragments, two red *Spondylus*(?) beads, and a coral fragment; another, from the hall, held two red beads and a stingray spine. In the Tipu temple, two Augustine(?) Red jars were buried below the lowermost floor north of the altar. One jar, its rim removed, held 338 *Spondylus* shell beads, more than 200 jade beads, and other items (Jones et al. 1986:47).

The statue shrine of Zacpeten Group A had a patolli board incised on a limestone slab. In Group C, the upper terrace of the temple substructure was painted with “linear red segmented bands filled with red and black designs” including mat motifs, possibly a patolli board (Pugh 2001:366) or a sky band.

Carved stone animal sculptures were relatively common at Mayapan, especially turtles, which may have been symbols of katun cycling (Taube 1988). At Topoxte, a large stuccoed and painted limestone turtle was found in oratory Structure E, a cavity in its carapace holding pieces of greenstone and pottery with copal (Hermes 2000b:85–86). Many smaller pottery turtles were found in offerings in the Main Plaza, a human face/head in the jaws (Hermes 2000b: Figures 64, 65). At Tipu, a limestone turtle was found in the rear room of the temple—perhaps originally in the oratory but moved when the structure was dismantled—and a copper turtle was in the jar with shell beads. Stone turtles were also noted at open hall Structure QQ1/1 at Nixtun-Ch’ich’ (not a temple assemblage; Pugh et al. 2016).

Various artifacts lacking obvious ritual usage in the Zacpeten assemblages indicate ostensibly quotidian tasks involving manos and metates, hammerstones, and bark beaters, particularly in halls. Chipped chert tools were produced (Yacubic 2014:171, Tables 16–18), and sherd net weights suggest the making or repair of fishing nets, especially in the Group C temple-oratory (Rice et al. 2017).

#### Why two assemblages at Zacpeten?

The two Zacpeten temple assemblages loosely duplicate each other, with Groups A and C exhibiting mirror symmetry and having similar construction histories. The temples, although of different sizes, are similarly proportioned, with interior benches and elongated medial altars. Both



had caches that were rededicated once. Pottery and other artifacts (and possible patolli boards) reveal generally similar ritual activities (Pugh 2001:529, 531, 533; Pugh and Rice 2009:164).

Nonetheless, it is clear from the architectural variability of the assemblages at Mayapan and elsewhere—and from the realization that some of the Peten complexes (e.g., Muralla de León, Zacpeten Group C, Cante Island?) exhibit a variant of the hybrid “blended” style—that no standard plan or template existed (Figure 3). If the “temple assemblage” category of today’s archaeologists corresponds to an ancient emic category, it evidently allowed considerable flexibility in kind, number, and positioning of structures, except for the Peten temple-on-the-east convention. If no rigid rules existed, does the extant variability reflect temporal change? Functional difference? Status? Ethno-religio-political identification? The comparative sizes of temple assemblages and the presence/absence of oratories (Tables 3 and 4) hint at two intended or emic categories. Oratories tend to be found in assemblages with larger plazas (Tipu is an exception), which might be considered “primary” complexes representing some aspect of a formal or “organized religion” at central ceremonial centers—for example, at Mayapan and Topoxte Island. Smaller, subsidiary assemblage-like groupings or blended groups, a hybrid of the BCG and temple assemblage, are found in less central or minor outlying areas.

Mayapan’s diverse oratories—and perhaps by inference, the assemblages—have been interpreted as noble/elite families’ or patrilineages’ constructions for veneration of their ancestors or lineage patrons. Although the Kokoms and the Tutul Xiws headed the city’s coruling lineage alliances, it is unclear which architectural groupings “belonged to” or were controlled by specific lineages or external polities. Also, archaeological research at Mayapan has “revealed little functional difference between” temple assemblages and BCGs (Peraza Lope and Masson 2014b:73). Possible reasons for variations or remodelings could include changes in the patrons’ political fortunes over time, but does this explain the absence of oratories? In Peten, the variability of oratories—absence in blended groups, damaged at Tipu, only platform (no superstructure) at Zacpeten Group C and at Ixlu, where it lies south of the temple—might intimate some secular political and temporal influences on their functions. Or, perhaps dedicated physical places for ancestor veneration were not deeply significant to the immigrants.

If the familial analogy is apropos, temple assemblages would have been oriented less to civic or political purposes or an “organized religion.” At Mayapan (Smith 1962), such a formal belief system was presumably related to Kukulcan/Quetzalcoatl. The city’s serpent temple (*castillo* Structure Q162) is a smaller copy of that at Chichen Itza, a nine-tiered radial pyramid (square footprint, four stairways) dedicated to Kukulcan. The Peten Itzas evidently acknowledged some version of this feathered serpent “cult,” given a Spaniard’s mention of a nine-tiered, radial temple at Nojpeten (Flores) and the recovery of a carved serpent head (Monument 1; Barrios 2009:80). This head might represent the quadripartite sky serpent Chicchan, an aspect of

Quetzalcoatl and patron of number 9. The head in the Topoxte Island temple assemblage may have been part of three-tiered, nonradial, temple Structure C (Hermes and Quintana 2000), or it may have been brought from elsewhere.

It might be expected that the temple-oratories of the blended groups would house effigy censers and rituals dedicated to both general, long-venerated Maya deities and specific lineage patrons. At Zacpeten, the large Group C temple-oratory meets this expectation: its effigy censers include both Patojo, focusing on Itzamna and Chaak, as well as Ídolos and Kulut presumed lineage patrons. But so did the Group A temple with a separate oratory. Differences may be represented by percentages: presumed lineage patrons/ancestors accounted for 6 of 20 (30 percent) effigy censers in Structure 602 in Group A, but only 2 of 14 (14 percent) in Group C’s Structure 764. The lack of Patojo and composite censers in the Group A oratory (Table 5, note b) supports the proposition that it was a family or household oratory, with “cult” functions served by the temple; the blended Group C temple-oratory served both functions.

### Who built Zacpeten’s temple assemblages?

In the Late and Terminal Classic periods, Zacpeten / Sak Peten was closely affiliated with Tikal: its ruler was a son of the Tikal lord, and ties are also seen in architecture (PP2 arrangement, twin pyramid complex), monuments, and pottery. In the Early Postclassic period, the community was taken over by Itzas, who constructed a dual Early Postclassic BCG around cal A.D. 1037–1227. Later, Kowojs and/or their ancestors arrived and constructed two temple assemblages.

Colonial-period Itza political organization was characterized by dualities, including senior–junior pairings in governance, an organization that extends back at least into the Early Postclassic period (e.g., dual BCGs). Consequently, one explanation for the two assemblages at Zacpeten in an Itza-governed *b’atab’il* draws from the Maya emphasis on complementary dualities (Pugh 2003b). As mentioned, two elite residential compounds—D and E—sit in the southwest (near assemblage C) and east (near assemblage A) sides of the peninsula, respectively (Figure 4), perhaps built by a senior–junior *ajkuchkab* (ward leader) pairing.

Despite the detail presented here, the question of exactly who constructed the Zacpeten temple assemblages remains unsettled. It is probably safe to assign them a general Xiw-Kowoj (as distinct from Itza) identity affiliation—but which, when, from where, and how does Topoxte fit in? Neither architecture nor artifacts provide clear answers (Table 6).

The Late Postclassic Kowoj builders of the Group A temple assemblage may have been descendants of or otherwise related to the Tikal-affiliated, Late/Terminal Classic-period residents. They demolished the western BCG shrine and exhumed its sacrifices, depositing the remains in a mass grave. The ostentatious incorporation of Classic carved monuments into Postclassic structure facades proclaimed

**Table 6.** Comparative summary of Zacpeten temple assemblage Groups A and C and Topoxte.

	GROUP A	GROUP C	TOPOXTE IS.
Plaza area	1,350 m <sup>2</sup>	362 m <sup>2</sup>	~1,796 m <sup>2</sup>
Structures (total)	8	5	9
Temple entrances	3	5	3
Temple substructure tiers	4	2–3	3
Temple caches	4	2 (+3 at statue shrine)	0?
Oratory	Has superstructure	Only platform	Has superstructure
Halls	1	1	1
Classic spolia	Conspicuous	Very little	No?
Estimated constr. date	A.D. 1380–1490	A.D. 1299–1419	A.D. 1350–1375
Censers in temple	Paired, in use	Terminated	In oratory Str. E
Ritual paraphernalia in temple	Terminated	Not terminated	?
Patolli layouts?	Str. 607 (incised)	Str. 764 (painted)	No

a heroic return to a homeland, invoking memories of Classic-period life on the Zacpeten peninsula as an identity statement and trumpeting local authenticity and powerful ancestral support. The Group A temple assemblage, then, can be argued to have served similar private, familial devotions, as suggested for the complexes at Mayapan.

The identity of the builders and users of the Group C blended assemblage is more opaque, given that they assert no deep ties to the central Peten lakes area or to Zacpeten. Was this assemblage associated more with the broader civic functions of a putative “organized religion”? Group C resembles the assemblages of the Topoxte Islands in Lake Yaxha: its hall is to the south as at Topoxte, but it has no separate oratory; it lacks a western structure as do complexes at Topoxte, Paxte, Muralla de León, and Tulum; its Kowoj pottery (CCP ware) includes decorated types rarely found elsewhere around the lakes except at Topoxte (Rice and Cecil 2009:262). Given that some features of Topoxte Island’s structures resemble the architecture of Quintana Roo (Bullard 1970:262), we might speculate that (some of) the builders and users of Group C included migrants from the eastern or northeastern Yucatan Peninsula (e.g., Tulum), perhaps a distinct group of lineages allied with or related to the Peten Kowojs. In addition, it would not be surprising if the builders and later users of Group C were not simply related to the Topoxte Kowojs but also included more recent northern immigrants repudiating the Spanish sympathies of their Xiw colleagues, who converted to Catholicism.

The Group C planners invoked cosmic sanctions by constructing stairways with symbolically—especially calendrically—significant numbers of steps: 9, 13, and 20. (Note also that each of Topoxte’s two oratories has 13 steps; Wurster 2000:Figure 238.) A platform was built in the usual place for an oratorio, but no superstructure was erected, raising the possibility of internal disagreements about building functions and resulting in a combined

oratory/temple. The temple-oratorio had not been swept clean, and the artifacts revealed varied quotidian activities. Pottery was decorated with yearbearer glyphs and k’an-cross motifs, and one wonders if the latter indicate final rituals in preparation for a k’an year(bearer)—said to be “good” years (Tozzer 1966 [1941]:142, n677). The Group C assemblage can be considered a monument to a calendrically based model of statecraft: a conservative, resilient ideology and decision-making apparatus institutionalized by ancient practices and rituals that had ensured cosmic continuity for two millennia.

### Concluding thoughts

Considered against the background of pervasive factionalism and conflict in Postclassic lowland history, the mix of Itza BCGs and Kowoj temple assemblages around the Peten lakes is not unexpected. As Grant Jones (2009:65) commented about warfare and reorganization in Yucatan, “the process of political reconstitution was flexible, resulting in a variety of sociopolitical formations that involved changing alliances and frequently contested boundaries.” The Itzas and Kowojs in Peten clearly had different ideas about civic-ceremonial—or politico-ritual—architecture and accoutrements. Aside from the *castillo* at Nojpeten (Flores), monumental architecture and effigy censers are rare in Itza territory, and temples are absent (Pugh and Shiratori 2018:243). The spatial characteristics of the mainland BCGs suggest that the Peten Itzas invested comparatively fewer resources and less labor in associated rituals, and limited plaza areas discouraged broad public participation. Perhaps in Peten, the Itzas and Kowojs simply expressed different architectural aesthetics of ancestor veneration.

The residents of Sak Peten had contact and trade with the Spaniards, as shown by recovery of a white clay pipe stem, metal artifacts and pieces of iron and copper/bronze, and a lead musket ball in the temple assemblages,

particularly in Group A (Pugh and Rice 2009:104–105, 109). The community, its temple assemblages, and its *popol naj* complex were rapidly abandoned around the time of conquest, perhaps in the first years of the eighteenth century, but the processes and precise timing of withdrawal are unknown. The extensive deposits of de facto refuse on the living surfaces, such as the council house, indicate a hasty exodus. Whether the departure was largely voluntary to avoid the postconquest factional wars or was forced by Spanish soldiers removing them to the new mission resettlements around the Nojpeten / Remedios / Flores Island presidio cannot be guessed from present evidence.

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