

# In the path of the Maize God: a royal tomb at Nakum, Petén, Guatemala

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*The authors describe the excavation and interpretation of an intact seventh-century high status burial at the Maya site of Nakum. The dead person wore an incised pectoral with an eventful biography, having started out as an Olmec heirloom 1000 years before. No less impressive was the series of votive rituals found to have been enacted at the tomb for another 100 years or more. The beautiful objects, their architectural setting and the long story they recount, offer a heart-breaking indictment of the multiple losses due to looting.*

**Keywords:** Nakum, Yaxha, Maya, Olmecs, royal tomb, offerings, Tikal Dancer plate, pectoral, jade, spindle whorls

## Introduction

Intensive looting in ancient Maya cities has resulted in a tremendous loss of archaeological information. The search for marketable artefacts from tombs and ritual deposits has damaged or destroyed architecture directly, while the pits and trenches left by illicit excavations have hastened the collapse of already fragile remains. North-eastern Guatemala has suffered greatly from this devastation. At the large site of Naranjo, for example, the two looter's

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trenches documented in 1996 had increased to 57 in 1998, and to more than 250 in 2004 (Quintana 2003; Fialko 2005).

However, the establishment of the Triángulo Park — covering Naranjo and two other large centres, Nakum and Yaxha — together with the onset of archaeological investigations at these and many smaller sites by the Guatemalan Institute of Anthropology and History (IDAEH), has led to a major reduction in the plunder. The Nakum Archaeological Project, directed by Jarosław Żrałka and Wiesław Koszkuł from Jagiellonian University, Kraków, Poland, which began in 2006, has had the rare opportunity to study a major undisturbed tomb at Nakum: Burial 1 in Structure 15. This is one of the first intact royal burials to be scientifically excavated by archaeologists in the Triángulo Park area. The discovery and its subsequent interpretation, reported here, serve to emphasise the detailed history that is lost through looting and the benefits of a modern strategy of investigation and restoration.

### **Nakum: history of investigations and description of the site**

Nakum lies at an elevation of about 200m asl and is situated in the heart of the modern Guatemalan district of Petén. Its discovery is attributed to the French Count Maurice de Périgny in 1905; who returned to explore the ruins in 1910 (Périgny 1908, 1911). Further reconnaissance was carried out by Alfred Tozzer and Raymond Merwin from the Peabody Museum, Harvard University (Tozzer 1913) and later by Sylvanus Morley (1937–38) and Nicholas Hellmuth (1992). In 1989, IDAEH initiated efforts to rescue and protect buildings in the core area of the site. Formal investigations were initiated in 1994 with the restoration and excavation of the most deteriorated monumental structures in the southern sector of the site.

IDAEH investigations indicate Nakum was first settled during the Middle Preclassic period (*c.* 800–300 BC). Many structures visible at Nakum today were constructed in the Late Classic period (AD 600–800) — the apogee of Maya civilisation. However, one of the most intriguing features of Nakum is its vigorous development during the Terminal Classic period (ninth–tenth centuries AD), when most other Southern Lowland Maya centres were in decline (Hermes & Żrałka 2008). The core of Nakum is divided into northern and southern sectors connected by the Périgny Causeway, named after the discoverer of the ruins. The largest and most impressive is the southern sector which is home to several tall temple-pyramid structures (Structures A, B, C, V and U) as well as the extensive Acropolis complex and many other buildings. The Acropolis (Figure 1) consists of a large platform, 180×150m at its base, which is topped primarily by ‘palace-like’ structures grouped around 12 courtyards or patios.

### **Structure 15, Burial 1 and its occupant**

Structure 15 is a 13m high mound on the eastern flank of the largest courtyard of the Acropolis, Patio 1 (Figures 1 & 2). By investigating this structure we sought to test the hypothesis put forward by Wiesław Koszkuł that it should contain an important burial. The hypothesis was based on the observation that at many other Maya sites structures situated on the eastern side of plazas often contain important internments, as documented

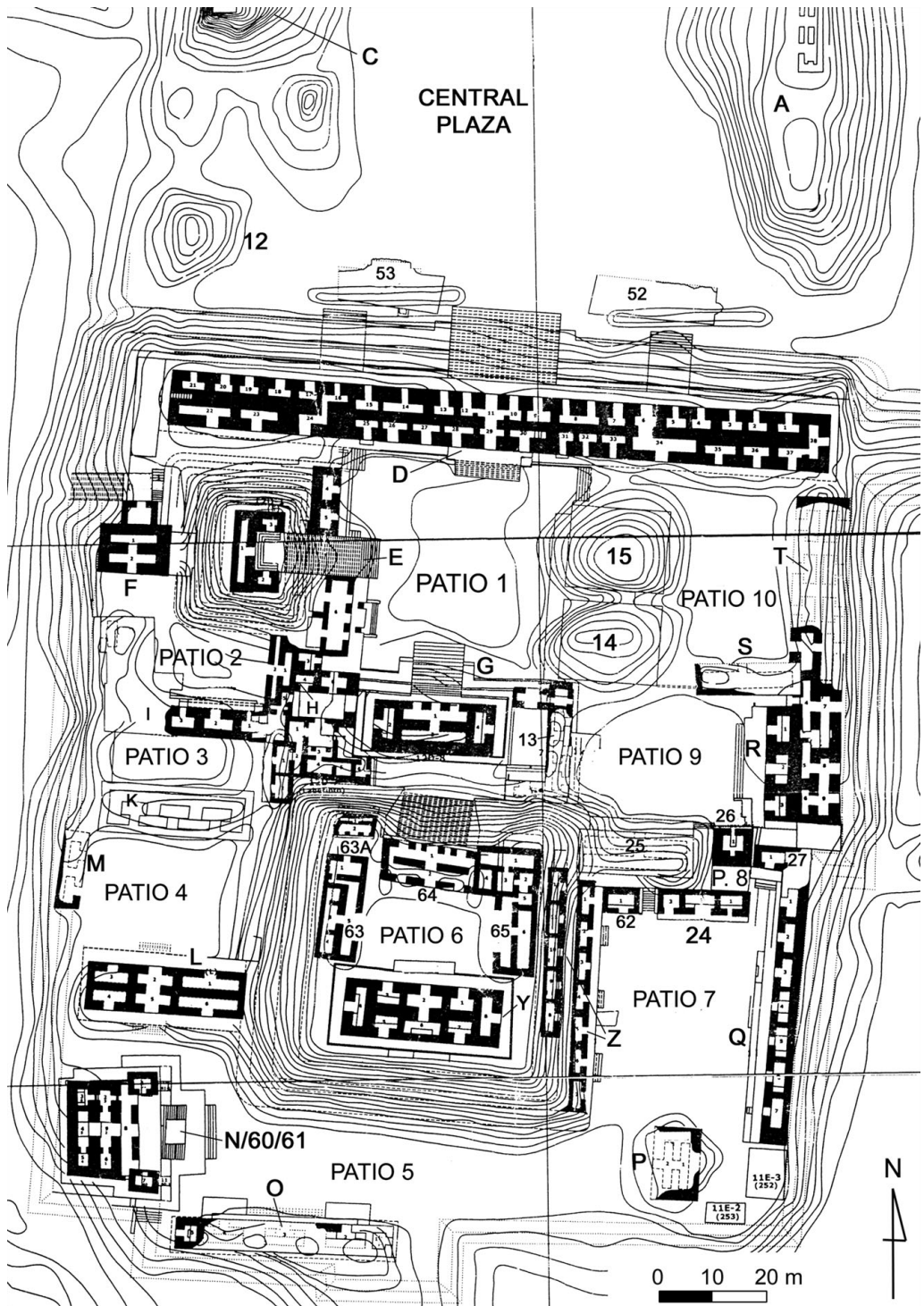


Figure 1. Plan of the southern sector of Nakum showing the Acropolis complex with Structure 15 on the eastern side of Patio 1 (see Zlatka et al. 2008 for a full description of the site) (map: Triángulo Project, IDAEH).



Figure 2. Acropolis of Nakum. Panoramic view of Patio 1 with Structures 14 and 15 excavated by the Nakum Archaeological Project shown between structure D, a long palace consisting of 38 rooms, and structure G, a palace or administrative building (photograph: Wiesław Koszkuł).

by investigations at Tikal, Caracol, Copan and Quirigua (Becker 1971, 1999, 2003; Chase & Chase 1987, 1994; Jones 1999; Sharer & Traxler 2006: 351–4). These buildings evidently served as shrines dedicated to the founders of elite families, including royal dynasties.

Structure 15 began as a small platform (designated as Structure 15 Sub-1) dated to the Protoclassic phase (c. 100/50 BC–AD 250/300+) and built on the level of Patio 1. This platform underwent several important remodellings and enlargements in the Early Classic period (c. AD 250/300–600 [phases 15 Sub-2, 15 Sub-3 and 15 Sub-4]) and was subsequently sealed and covered in the Late Classic period (AD 600–800/850) by a new construction consisting of a pyramid platform topped by a temple consisting of two chambers (phase 15-1) (Figure 3).

A pit opened on the summit of this construction encountered large capstones c. 1.75m below the surface. These turned out to be the top of a large burial chamber covered by an intact corbelled vault, now designated Burial 1 (previously known as Tomb 1). Two looters' trenches dug into this structure from the east had failed to find the tomb, although they severely damaged the building. The tomb chamber was built on the central north-south axis of the structure and was 4.55m long, 1.50m wide and 2.20m high. The remains of a human skeleton with its head oriented to the north were found inside (Figure 4). Unfortunately, the

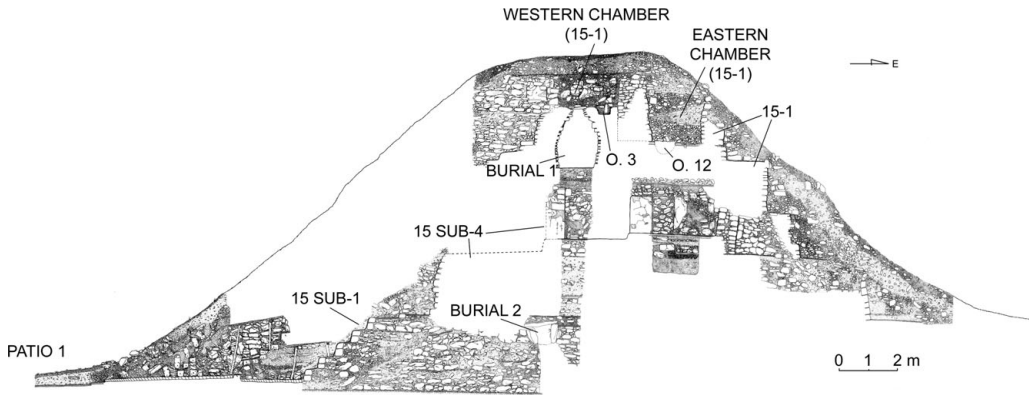


Figure 3. Cross-section of Nakum Structure 15 showing major architectural phases as well as burials and offerings discovered during excavations (drawing: Wiesław Koszkuł, Bogumił Pilarski and Katarzyna Radnicka).

bones had been almost entirely destroyed by rats, so that only small pieces of scattered bone remained. The skeletons of these rodents were found at several places inside the tomb. The destruction of the bones made it impossible to determine the sex of the deceased person, although analysis of the surviving remains revealed that the individual was most likely to have been between 35 and 45 years old (medium adult) at the time of death (Matute 2006). There were traces of red pigment that had originally covered the body. The tomb contained a large quantity of high status goods, among which were ear spools, nearly 500 jade and shell beads, a jade pectoral adorned with a hieroglyphic inscription, as well as several vessels.

### Grave goods: pottery

Three vessels were deposited in the southern part of the tomb chamber (Figure 5). Two of them were large monochrome bowls of the Azucar Impressed (Vessel 1) and Chaquiste Impressed (Vessel 3) types. However, of special significance is Vessel 2, which is a lateral-flange tripod plate with semi-cylindrical supports. It held the skeleton of a bird and several small pieces of charcoal. Painted at the centre of this plate was a representation of the dancing Maize God, one of the most important deities for the ancient Maya. This vessel can be ascribed to the so-called 'Tikal Dancer' style (see: Reents-Budet 1994: 197–8; Boot 2003;Looper *et al.* 2009: 122–31). It should be stressed that until now only a few complete vessels of this style have been excavated from a controlled archaeological context. These were found within tombs at Tikal and at Uaxactun — another important Maya centre located in northern Guatemala — as well as in burials from the Dolores region of the south-eastern Petén, Guatemala (Smith 1955: fig. 73a1; Culbert 1993: figs. 43a, 48c, 51a & 78a1; Mayer 2010). The majority of these vessels come from looted contexts and are now in private or public collections, so their exact place of origin is unknown (Boot 2003; Looper 2008; Mayer 2010). Some of them were ascribed to the broad Tikal area, based on chemical analysis. Thus, archaeological, stylistic and chemical data indicate that vessels of this type were being produced by different artists and workshops in the Tikal region and its vicinity

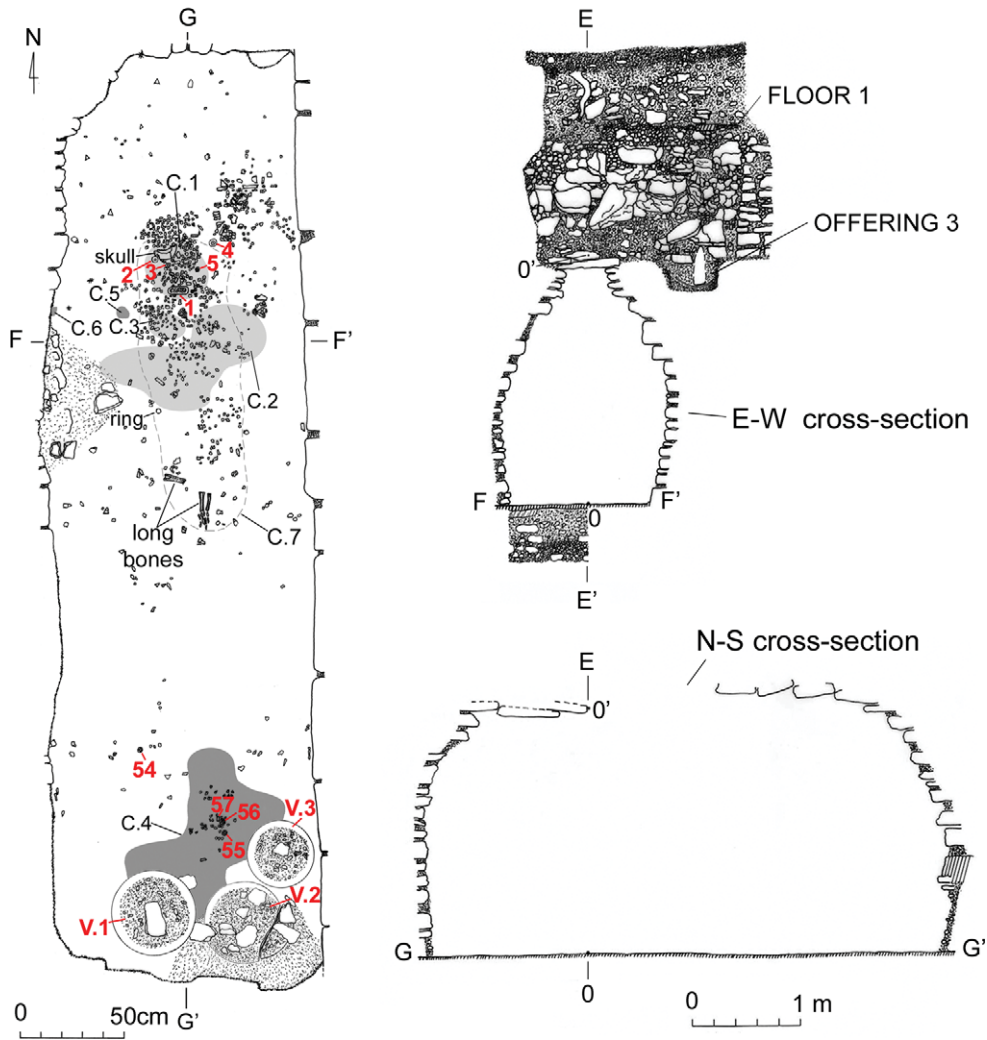


Figure 4. Plan and cross-section of Nakum Burial 1. Key to matters discussed in the text: 1) pectoral; 2–5) ear spoons; 54–57) spindle whorls; C.7) skeleton area; V.1–V.3: Vessels 1–3 (drawing: Wiesław Koszkul and Jarosław Żrałka).

(Reents-Budet 1994: 197–8, 339; Reents-Budet & Bishop 2003; Looer 2008) although different locations should also be considered (see Mayer 2010).

## The pectoral

The most significant find from the tomb was located in the area of the upper part of the body, which was covered in nearly 500 jade and shell artefacts (mostly beads). Among them were two pairs of jade ear ornaments and a jade pectoral (Figure 6) (Koszkul *et al.* 2007; Żrałka & Koszkul 2007; Finamore & Houston 2010: 132–3). The pectoral is in the form



*Figure 5. Vessels from Burial 1. In the foreground the Tikal Dancer style plate (diameter 382mm) is visible (photograph: Robert Slaboński, the Nakum Archaeological Project).*



Figure 6. Burial 1. Jade beads, pectoral and ear spoons in their original positions (photograph: Jarosław Żralka).

of a shell and is 106mm long and 49mm wide. On the upper edge of the convex side there are two suspension holes. This position indicates that this piece was once part of a larger necklace formed by circular and tubular jade beads and was laid on the buried person's chest in a horizontal orientation.

The concave side of the pectoral is incised with the upper portion of an anthropomorphic figure wearing an elaborate headdress, while the convex side bears a column of hieroglyphs (Figure 7). Judging by the analysis of similar pieces, the figure is most likely to represent an ancestor. Such figures are usually represented by an isolated head, or a head with a single arm, and are shown floating in scrolls representing smoke or flames (Houston *et al.* 2006: 50–51; see also Iglesias & Sanz 1999: fig. 1; Laporte & Fialko 1995: fig. 19). The horizontal orientation of the Nakum piece places the figure's head in a downward position (Koszkul *et al.* 2007). This theme is repeated on a number of carved monuments (e.g. Tikal Stelae 29 and 31 [Jones & Satterthwaite 1982: figs. 49a, 51c] or El Baúl Stela 1, and Takalik Abaj Stela 2 [Sharer with Traxler 2006: 237, 248]). These show ancestral figures (usually identified by hieroglyphic names in their headdresses) floating above their living descendents, gazing down on them as witnesses to their ritual actions.

The convex side of the Nakum pectoral carries a short hieroglyphic text consisting of five incised glyphs (Figure 7). It begins with a description of the jade pectoral itself, here represented pictographically at the end of a beaded necklace, probably read as the possessed



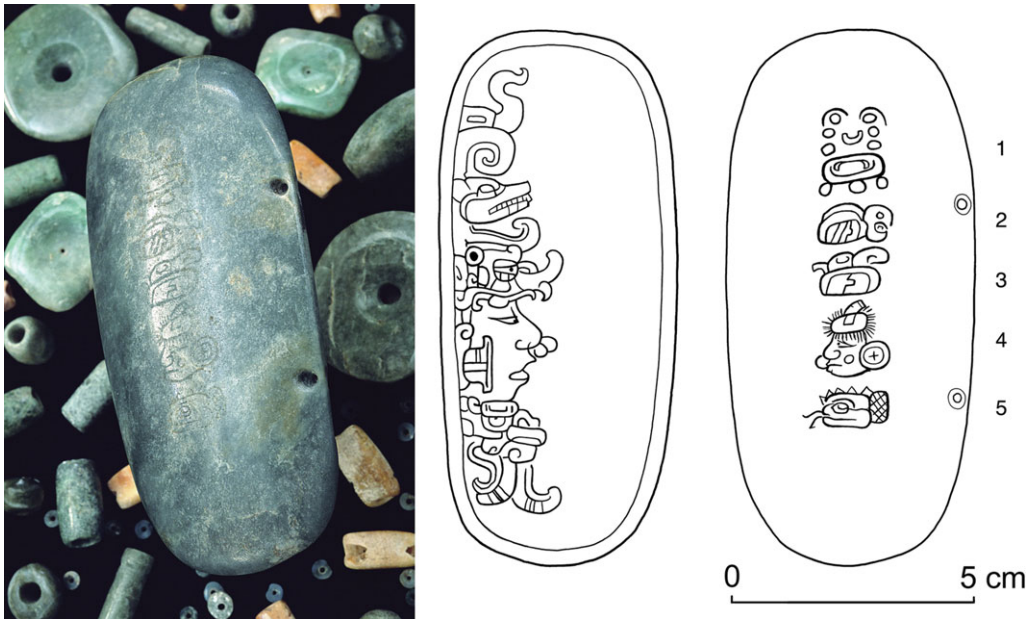


Figure 7. View of the convex side of the pectoral, along with some of the jade jewels discovered in Burial 1 at Nakum (left), the pectoral is 106mm long; drawing of both sides of the pectoral (right) (photograph: Robert Slaboński, the Nakum Archaeological Project; drawing: Simon Martin).

form (yu)-UH ‘his/her jewel’. A royal title follows featuring **AJAW** ‘lord, ruler’ attached to what may be an early spelling of **YAX-a** (David Stuart *pers. comm.* 2006). If so, it could well refer to Yaxha, Nakum’s Triangulo Park neighbour located approximately 11km to the south. The text is completed by the personal name of a previously unknown king called **IXIIM? CHAN** ‘Maize-(God) Snake’. Taking all this data into account, the inscription can be read as: ‘[This is] *the jewel of the Yaxha*[?] *lord Maize-God Snake*’.

This inscription gives rise to a number of questions concerning the potential relationship between Nakum and Yaxha, and the origin of the pectoral itself. One possibility is that Nakum might have been, at least for a time, part of a larger Yaxha kingdom. Equally, the pectoral could have been a gift, or a trophy taken from Yaxha in some conflict. The style of incision on either side of the pectoral differs, suggesting that they were made by different artists, perhaps at different times. Nonetheless, it seems probable that the figure shown on the concave side of the pectoral was an ancestor (possibly the father) of the owner of this object mentioned in the inscription. This floating character wears a series of masks and zoomorphic motifs, and it is likely that the uppermost one, a mammal with a long row of teeth, represents part of his personal name. Stylistically, this piece can be ascribed to the Early Classic period, to some point between the third and fifth centuries AD.

On the evidence of the ceramics found in Burial 1, the interment took place in the seventh or early eighth century AD. This placement has recently been confirmed by radiocarbon dating. A carbon sample taken from the plate with the image of the dancing Maize God was dated to  $1300 \pm 35$  BP ( $2\sigma$  cal AD 650–780). It is therefore clear that the jade pectoral is at least several centuries older than the tomb itself.

One explanation is that it was kept by the royal family as an heirloom and deposited in the burial of a much later dynast. This was a popular custom among the ancient Maya and we know of several other royal tombs in which items from earlier times were included (e.g. at Calakmul [see: Carrasco 1998: 384; Fields & Reents-Budet 2005: 255] or Palenque [Ruz 1973: fig. 226]). The ancient Maya sometimes acquired and kept objects of even greater antiquity, made in Olmec style (e.g. pectorals and pendants), which in some cases were covered by new inscriptions and representations (Schele & Miller 1986: 119–20; Fields & Reents-Budet 2005: 182, 191–4; see also Pellecer Alecio 2006: 1028; Freidel 2010). Such objects, related to real or fictitious ancestors, served to legitimise the power of the kings who possessed them. The Nakum pectoral is clearly related to much earlier jade ornaments attributed to the Olmec culture, were they are often referred to as ‘spoons’ or ‘clamshell pendants’ (see Andrews 1986: figs. 3, 7 & 9c, 1987: fig. 1b: 23, 25, 26, 29 & 32; Coe *et al.* 1995: cat. nos. 70 & 75; Hammond 1995: fig. 35, 1999: fig. 1; Castro-Leal 1996: cat. no. 98). The close resemblance of the Nakum pectoral to several similar Olmec artefacts may indicate that it is actually an Olmec piece that was subsequently reused by the Maya who made incisions on both sides of it. Moreover, the suspension holes drilled in the Nakum piece, which go from the top and back of the pectoral (and not through the front) is a typical Olmec trait. Thus, it seems probable that the Nakum artefact had at least three episodes: it was manufactured in Olmec times, possibly before 600 BC, it was later ornamented during the Early Classic or Terminal Late Preclassic by the Maya (as we have already mentioned, incisions on both sides may differ in time), and subsequently kept for several hundred years until it was finally deposited in Burial 1 during the Late Classic period.

### Spindle whorls and sex

Among the other artefacts found in Burial 1 were four spindle whorls (Figure 8). Weaving was an important activity for Maya women, even among the elite, and the discovery of spindle whorls as well as a small finger ring (sized appropriately for a female hand) in the tomb could indicate that it held a royal woman. Most lowland Maya burials containing spindle whorls and where the sex could be determined, belonged to women, especially at the aforementioned neighbours of Nakum, Tikal and Uaxactun (Welsh 1988), as well as at more distant Caracol (Chase *et al.* 2008). That said, spindle whorls have also been documented in male burials from the south-eastern Petén, the Guatemalan Pacific coast and adjacent highlands (Chase *et al.* 2008: 136; Cossich 2009). Moreover, it is known that weaving was performed by men in colonial and modern times in both the Maya highlands and in Central Mexico (Cossich *pers. comm.* 2008; Cossich 2009). The available data indicates that although spindle whorls predominate in female burials, they are not secure pointers to the sex of the interred. The significance of their deposition may have less to do with craft specialisation and the tasks of daily life than with religious symbolism. Among the contemporary Tz’utujil Maya, the process of weaving is conceived in terms akin to the process of birth. Similar concepts can also be detected in pre-Columbian Central Mexico, where spinning and weaving were metaphors for life, death and rebirth (Sullivan 1982; Koszkuł *et al.* 2009).



Figure 8. Spindle whorls found in Burial 1 (photograph: Jarosław Żralka).

## Offerings for the royal person and the Protoclassic burial

The temple-style building located at the summit (phase 15–1) originally had two interconnected rooms. The Maya reused the western one for Burial 1, while the eastern chamber received associated offerings (Figure 9). The first offering (no. 11) consisted of a group of 27 limestone bars carefully deposited in a small cavity cut into the floor (Figure 10). The precise function of these bars is unknown, although some have suggested that similar objects might have been used as spacers in the production of fishing nets or some other kind of weaving technology (Chase *et al.* 2008: 133). The second offering (no. 12) from the same chamber included two large ceramic plates, one of which was upturned and covering the other — enclosed between them was a small jade bead (Figure 10). Close to these vessels were found nine flint knives and projectile points (Figure 11), some in a vertical position others beneath the plates. At least four of the flints were stuccoed and painted with a blue pigment that was well preserved. After these depositions were made, the eastern room was filled with rubble and both chambers were sealed by the construction of a surmounting floor. This new level was topped by a building that was made almost entirely from perishable materials.

Shortly after that time, another cache was placed almost directly above the tomb, consisting of two Late Classic (eighth century AD) vessels and a broken greenstone tube (offering 3) (Figure 12). Later, in the same area, about 170mm beneath the summit of the pyramid, a second offering was deposited (offering 4). This included a Terminal Classic (ninth century) vessel that contained three shell finger rings (bearing incised representations of human faces), as well as six shell beads and bone fragments (Figure 13). These later caches were most probably placed during rituals venerating the deceased king or queen. The



Figure 9. Excavations in the eastern chamber of Structure 15 temple (phase 15–1). Note two offerings deposited in the floor of the chamber (offerings 11 & 12) (photograph: Robert Staboński, the Nakum Archaeological Project).

Terminal Classic offering indicates that more than a century after the sealing of the tomb, people were aware of its location and continued to honour this long-dead ruler.

After the tomb chamber of Structure 15 was cleared, small cavities were found in its stuccoed floor. These suggested that other burials or ritual deposits could lie below and to



Figure 10. a) General view of offering 11 with a set of stone bars; b) offering 12 with flint projectile points and knives seen close to the plates, the diameter of both plates is 420mm (photograph: Wiesław Koszkuł and Jarosław Żralka).

test this possibility a pit was sunk from the level of the tomb to the bottom of the platform. At about 5m another interment was encountered. Burial 2 consisted of a crypt lined and covered by large cut stones (Figure 14). Within the crypt was the skeleton of a woman who subsequent analysis suggests was a medium or major adult at the time of her death. She was furnished with two polychrome vessels and a shell bead. Stratigraphically, the crypt was associated with an earlier version of Structure 15 (phase 15 Sub-1). It was most probably placed into the substructure after the death of an important member of the local elite. Both vessels deposited in the burial represent the Ixcantio Orange Polychrome type and are typical of the still poorly understood Protoclassic phase (c. 100/50 BC–AD 250/300+). The location of Nakum Burial 2, the style of its construction, and furnishings, suggest that it was an elite burial, probably for another member of the local royal family.

## Discussion

We identify Burial 1 as that of a Nakum ruler, based on a number of factors. Analysis of Preclassic and Classic lowland Maya burials made by Krejci and Culbert (1995) shows that a special category of burials belonging to the uppermost class of Maya society and classified as ‘royal burials’ can be distinguished by their size, their elaborate contents and their central location. The authors give a number of status markers of these royal tombs (Krejci & Culbert 1995: tab. 11), the most important of which are present in the Nakum case. These include its formal construction within a large structure of pyramid-temple type, its orientation on the central axis of the building, and the enormous size of its interior space (one of the largest yet found in the Maya lowlands). Moreover, Structure 15 is located in the Acropolis — the largest and most impressive complex of Nakum. Among other status markers of royal burials present in Burial 1 is the large quantity of precious objects — including ear spools — and a red pigment that once covered the body. Of special importance is the large number of jade and shell artefacts, foremost among them a unique jade pectoral.

The discoveries of major interments and ritual offerings inside Structure 15, spanning several hundred years, demonstrates that this building had an enduring significance for the

inhabitants. Structure 15's location on the eastern side of Patio 1 — the largest courtyard of the huge Acropolis complex — makes it part of a wider pattern in elite Maya burials. Given its royal associations, Nakum Structure 15 may well have functioned, for at least part of its existence, as a memorial for the local ruling family.



Figure 11. Flint points and knives from Nakum offering 12, Late Classic period. The point on the left side is 144mm high (photograph: Robert Slaboński, the Nakum Archaeological Project).

The ritual importance of the eastern shrine complex and its association with burials (including those of the founders and important family members) was first recognised in the 1960s during excavations at Tikal (Becker 1971, 1999, 2003; Jones 1999). Marshall Becker named this architectural pattern Plaza Plan 2 and proposed that there was a distinctive ritual function for eastern-oriented structures within architectural compounds. Later it became clear that many other Maya sites share the same pattern, with important tombs and caches located in eastern shrines (Chase & Chase 1994, 1998).

The east has always had a special meaning for the ancient Maya, being the direction of the rising sun. The Maya symbolically linked this direction with resurrection and rebirth of the sun after its night journey through the Underworld. One of the most complex and revealing depictions of the Maize God's death and burial in Maya art shows the solar deity apparently rising from the Underworld cave in which he lies (see Taube 2004; Martin 2006: 156–61). The relationship is at its

clearest on the great sarcophagus of Pakal at Palenque, where the dead king is 'reborn' in the guise of the infant Maize God from a sun-marked offering bowl (Martin 2006: 160). One of the most important tropes of ancestral portraits is their appearance with solar cartouches (Taube 2009: 103 & figs. 16a & b).

It may also be relevant that directly opposite Structure 15, on the other side of Patio 1, stands Structure E. Earlier work on this large building by Bernard Hermes and Zoila Calderón revealed that it was an elite residence during the Late Classic period (Hermes 2002: fig. 1), and it is quite likely that the person interred in Burial 1 lived there. This same individual might have been responsible for the architectural expansion documented at Nakum during the first part of the Late Classic period (Tepeu 1 phase). The jade pectoral is consistent with the inferred royal status of the person in Burial 1. A precious, already antique, object of this type was probably kept by the royal family as an heirloom. The person buried in Burial 1 could well have been a descendant of the ruler

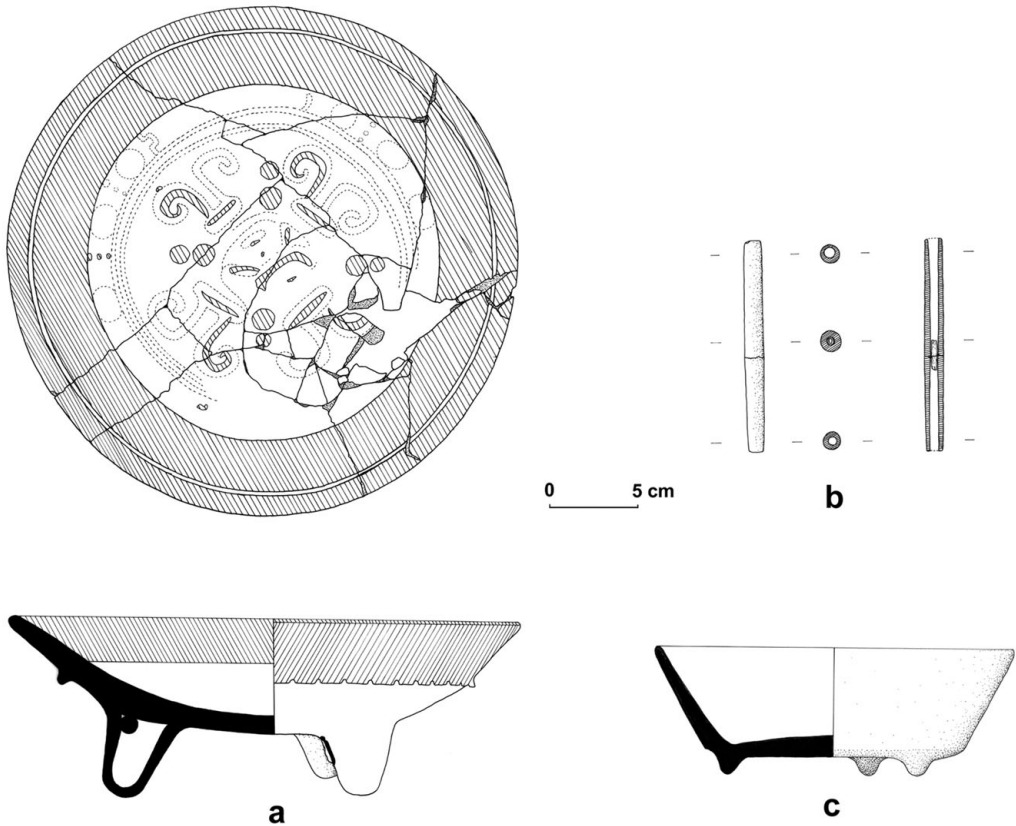


Figure 12. Artefacts found in offering 3 excavated above Nakum Burial 1, Late Classic period: a) tripod plate of Saxche Orange Polychrome type; b) jade tube broken into two pieces (a pectoral?); c) tripod bowl of Tinaja Red type (drawing: Katarzyna Radnicka).

mentioned in the pectoral inscription and/or of the ancestor represented on its concave side.

It has long been recognised that jade jewellery had a meaning beyond its intrinsic value and role in personal beautification. Jade jewels were the finery of the Maize God, the green colour symbolic of the green foliage of sprouting cornstalks (Miller & Martin 2004: 70; Taube 2005). Maya kings believed that after death they would follow the path of the Maize God, defeat the Lords of Death in the Underworld and be reborn. In preparation for this resurrection they were dressed for their last journey in the ceremonial jewellery that they had worn during their lives (Miller & Martin 2004: 57–8, 70). The Tikal Dancer plate provides an explicit link to the mythology of the Maya Maize God. The subject of such plates is the dance of resurrection and apotheosis for the Maize God (Reents-Budet 1994: 198; Loooper *et al.* 2009: 124). It refers to the moment when this deity first dances and then ascends into the sky, indicated by his dynamic pose and elements such as the feathered wings sometimes shown on his arms or belt (Loooper *et al.* 2009: 124). In Nakum, this theme of rebirth and ascension may be further symbolised by the presence of the skeleton of a bird deposited inside the Tikal Dancer plate.



Figure 13. Vessel with three shell rings and beads discovered on top of Structure 15 (offering 4), Terminal Classic period. The diameters of the rings range from 23–30mm and from 13–19mm in height (photograph: Robert Slaboński, the Nakum Archaeological Project).

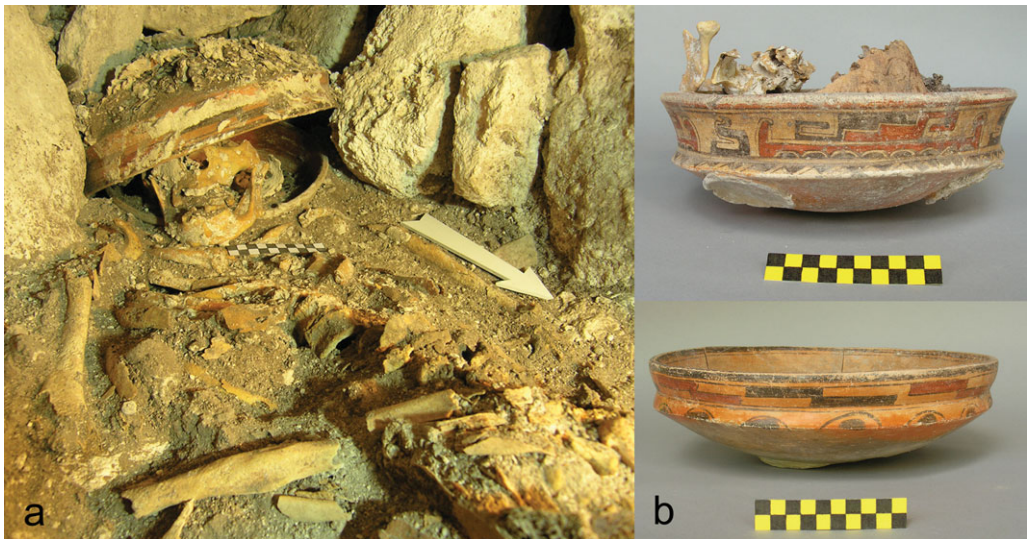


Figure 14. View of Burial 2 discovered in Structure 15 along with two vessels found inside it, Protoclassic phase (photograph: Wiesław Koszkul and Jarosław Żralka).



In sum, the evidence recovered by the excavation of Burial 1 in Nakum Structure 15 permits a series of deductions and inferences. We may surmise that it contained an important local dynast who, in accordance with the Maya world-view and beliefs, was believed to have entered the path of the Maize God — a journey of transformation that promised rebirth both in the twin metaphors of a recurring harvest of corn and in the daily rising of the sun at dawn.

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