DOMESTIC AND POLITICAL LIVES OF CLASSIC MAYA ELITES: THE EXCAVATION OF RAPIDLY ABANDONED STRUCTURES AT AGUATECA, GUATEMALA

Takeshi Inomata, Daniela Triadan, Erick Ponciano, Estela Pinto, Richard E. Terry, and Markus Eberl

The Aguateca Archaeological Project conducted extensive excavations of elite residences at the Maya center of Aguateca, which was attacked by enemies and abandoned rapidly at the end of the Classic period. Burned buildings contained rich floor assemblages, providing extraordinary information on the domestic and political lives of Classic Maya elites. Each elite residence served for a wide range of domestic work, including the storage, preparation, and consumption of food, with a relatively clear division of male and female spaces. These patterns suggest that each of the excavated elite residences was occupied by a relatively small group, which constituted an important economic and social unit. In addition, elite residences were arenas where crucial processes of the operation of the polity and court unfolded through political gatherings, artistic production, and displays of power.

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ond wave came in the 1980s with a more explicit focus on households. Archaeologists recognized that households as the most basic socioeconomic units interacted dynamically with larger social, economic, and political institutions, leading to the belief that the examination of these small groups was critical for understanding various aspects of human societies and behavior (Haviland 1985; Manzanilla 1987; Rathje 1983; Tourtellot 1988; Webster 1989; Webster and Gonlin 1988; Wilk and Ashmore 1988; Wilk and Rathje 1982). Following Netting et al. (1984), many scholars viewed households as action groups that collaborated in various domestic activities and focused their research on the question of what the household as a unit did. This was followed by the third wave of development in the 1990s. Archaeologists inspired particularly by gender studies now viewed households not as natural, homogeneous units but as culturally constructed entities with internal heterogeneity and contestation (Brumfiel 1991; Hendon 1996; Joyce 1993; Tringham 1991). They have shown that a study of actions and decision-making of the household as a whole is not enough and that a stronger emphasis on intentions, perceptions, and strategies of individual agents is necessary. Another inspiration came from practice theory, which argued that large structures of society played out through daily practices (Bourdieu 1977: 163–164). Domestic groups as primary social arenas of such practices present critical fields for an inquiry into this issue.

We believe that the study of domestic groups requires attention both to the structural properties of such groups and to the dynamic processes of change and reproduction through interactions among individual agents. In terms of the analysis of their structures, households may be the most basic units of collaboration and resource-sharing in many societies, but they should not be considered the only social unit responsible for domestic activities. There may exist various domestic groups associated with different sets of activities, which nest within or cross-cut each other. Goody (1958: 56) defined domestic groups as units of individuals associated with specific domestic activities, such as reproduction, residence, and food production. In other words, the unit of food storage may not be the same as those of food consumption, co-residence, or reproduction (Goody 1958). Researchers need to examine how different domestic groups articulate with each other, taking into consideration the degree of their variability and fluidity.

These structures of domestic groups shape, and are shaped by, practices and perceptions of individuals, comprising contestation, negotiation, and power asymmetry among them (Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1984). For the archaeological study of the role of individual agents, in which researchers cannot directly observe people, the analysis of activities conducted by different individuals through their material remains has proved particularly effective (Hendon 1996; Tringham 1991; Wright 1991). We should also note that the same individuals may be at once parts of larger social groups, such as kin-based and non-kin-based associations, male or female groups, and ego-centered personal networks, that cross-cut domestic groups. It follows that households and other domestic groups should not be considered as “domestic” or “private” spheres separated from “political” or “public” spheres (Rapp 1991; Yanagisako 1979). In most traditional societies, in particular, what we call the private and the public merge inseparably, in contrast to modern societies, in which the division between “home” and “work” is relatively common.

Although Maya archaeologists have played important roles in the development of household archaeology, our understanding of Classic Maya domestic groups is still limited. The difficulty derives partly from the fact that most Classic Maya sites were abandoned gradually. In such cases, most objects originally stored in a house were carried away, and a small number of remaining artifacts were severely disturbed at the time of abandonment or through postabandonment scavenging (Cameron and Tomka 1993; Schiffer 1976, 1985, 1987; Stevenson 1982). Although architectural remains and midden materials provide important information, they represent palimpsests of diverse practices by various individuals at different moments. Sorting and extracting traces of distinct practices from such remains is a daunting task. In most archaeological studies, the notion of individual agents remains highly abstract, with agency attributed to abstracted concepts or categories rather than to real people. Moreover, there is considerable disagreement among Mayanists regarding the basic questions of occupancy patterns of residences, spatial configurations of activities, and the composition of domestic groups (e.g., Becquelin and Michelet 1994; Hendon 1997; Tourtellot et al. 1990;
Webster and Freter 1990). Without a sound grasp of such issues, our understanding of gender, power relations in and between households, and articulations of domestic groups with larger political organization will remain tenuous. In this regard, rapidly abandoned sites present unique advantages. Rich floor assemblages at such sites allow closer access to the specificity of past individuals and activities in higher resolution (Inomata and Sheets 2000; Inomata and Webb 2002; Sheets 1992). When combined with the study of architectural remains and midden materials, the analysis of floor assemblages left in rapid abandonment provide rich pictures of daily lives.

Aguateca and Previous Work

The center of Aguateca occupied the top of a steep escarpment overlooking Laguna Aguateca in the southwestern Petén in the Guatemalan lowlands (Figure 1). Its epicenter consisted of the Palace Group, which probably was a royal residential compound, and the Main Plaza (Figure 2). These monumental complexes were connected by the Causeway, along which was a densely occupied elite residential area. After pioneering work by Graham (1967) and Houston (1993) that focused on epigraphic studies and mapping, Inomata directed systematic archaeological investigations at this site from 1990 to 1993 as a part of the Petexbatún Regional Archaeological Project (Demarest 1997; Demarest et al. 1997; Inomata 1995, 1997). Fieldwork of the Petexbatún Project documented a series of defensive walls that were hastily constructed toward the end of the Late Classic period, probably in response to the escalation of warfare in the region. In the elite residential area along the Causeway, Inomata extensively excavated Structures M7-35, M8-10, M8-11, and M8-17 (Figure 2), which contained numerous complete and reconstructible objects and clear traces of burning (Inomata and Stiver 1998). These data indicate that Aguateca was attacked by enemies at the end of the Late Classic period, and its central part was burned. We did not find any clear evidence of postabandonment scavenging. The lack of reoccupation at Aguateca significantly contributed to the preservation of floor assemblages in burned houses.

The results of the Petexbatún Project have been reported elsewhere (Inomata 1997; Inomata and Stiver 1998), and here we briefly summarize data from Structures M7-35 and M8-10 that were almost completely exposed. These buildings consisted of three main rooms and smaller additions. They were most likely elite residences and contained numerous domestic objects, including storage jars, cooking and serving vessels, grinding stones, and a variety of stone tools. The number of artifacts in the central rooms was relatively small. Among them were long...
obsidian blades and an imitation stingray spine probably used for bloodletting, jars and serving vessels, and stone mortars for pigment preparation. The central rooms appear to have served for the reception of visitors, scribal work, and the storage of some ritual objects. The west room of Structure M7-35 and the south room of Structure M8-10 contained numerous ceramic vessels, including large storage jars, indicating their use for food storage. The presence of a mano and metate set in the west room of Structure M7-35 also point to food preparation in this area. In addition, excavators found seven bone needles and seven spindle whorls associated with the south room of Structure M8-10, which suggests that a female (or females) engaged in textile production in or in front of this room. The east room of Structure M7-35 was
nearly devoid of artifacts and may have been a resting and sleeping space. The north room of Structure M8-10 contained six stone mortars and two pestles for pigment preparation and appears to have been used for scribal work. Also found in this room were numerous bone and shell ornaments. Small additions of the two structures appear to have served as areas for food preparation and manufacturing. Inomata (1995; Inomata and Stiver 1998) has argued that, whereas a wide range of domestic activities, including resting, sleeping, and food storage, preparation, and consumption, was conducted in and around these buildings, Structures M7-35 and M8-10 were also spaces for political interactions, scribal and manufacturing activities, and administrative work. He has also suspected that a resident of Structure M8-10 was a male scribe, who mainly used the central and north rooms for his scribal and political tasks, whereas the south room was used primarily by a female, who may have been the scribe’s wife, and children.

**Aguateca Archaeological Project**

Building on the results of the previous research, the Aguateca Archaeological Project conducted larger-scale fieldwork under the direction of Inomata, Triadan, and Ponciano, focusing on the extensive excavation of rapidly abandoned elite residences in the central part of the site (Inomata 2001a, 2002; Inomata and Triadan 2000, 2002; Inomata et al. 1998; Triadan 2000). We extensively exposed six structures in the elite residential area along the Causeway. Structures M7-34, M8-4, M8-8, and M8-13 were long multiroom buildings, whereas Structures M8-2 and M8-3 consisted of single rooms. We also extensively excavated two large, vaulted buildings in the Palace Group, Structures M7-22 and M7-32.

Excavations proceeded carefully to document detailed information of rich artifact deposits. A 2-x-2-m grid system was established over each structure. Excavators followed the natural layers of topsoil, wall fall, and the floors, and screened excavated soils through a ¼ inch or finer mesh. All artifacts found on the floors were photographed and drawn after they were carefully exposed in situ. In addition, we point-plotted numerous objects, using a total station. Point-plotted objects include artifacts found in the topsoil and wall-fall layers, many of which appear to have been placed originally in higher locations, such as on shelves or beams. In this manner, we were able to record the exact three-dimensional locations of these objects without significantly interrupting excavation. We also mapped the distribution of small artifacts found on the floors with a total station, because artifact deposits were so dense that the locations of small items, such as obsidian blades, were obscured in conventional drawings. At the end of each day, point-plot data stored in a data collector attached to the total station were downloaded to a laptop computer, which generated distribution maps of small objects immediately.

The project members are currently analyzing excavated materials, and Kazuo Aoyama joined us as a codirector for this phase of the project. Laboratory work includes the analysis of ceramics by Triadan, Pinto, Inomata, Marco Antonio Monroy, Yukiko Tonoike, Pablo Rodas, Elisa Jiménez, and Diego Guerra, the analysis of lithics by Kazuo Aoyama, faunal studies by Kitty Emery, botanical analysis by David Lentz, and the conservation of delicate objects and the analysis of ceramic masks by Harriet Beaubien. The analysis of fatty acids in ceramics by Shannon Coyston turned out to be frustrating, since organic residues were hardly preserved in shallow deposits in the tropical lowlands. Certain chemical signatures in soils, however, appear to be more stable, and soil analysis by Richard Terry is providing critical data on activity areas. Epigraphic data are analyzed by Stephen Houston and Eberl.

An important goal of the lab seasons is to examine the number, distribution, and types of objects associated with each building, and Table 1 lists the frequencies of select artifact types that have already been analyzed. Yet, most ceramic vessels and other objects broke when the roofs and walls of the structures collapsed. Thus, it is impossible to know the exact number and distribution of artifacts until we complete the extremely time-consuming and labor-intensive task of sorting mixed fragments and refitting them. The following discussion is based on the current results of lab analysis, as well as preliminary evaluations of artifact distribution in the field.

**Excavation Results**

All the excavated structures in the area along the Causeway exhibited patterns of rapid abandonment and traces of burning. Structures M7-22 and M7-32 of the Palace Group, however, did not have rich floor assemblages. We suspect that the royal family evacuated the center when they felt the threat of an immi-
Table 1. Frequencies of Select Artifact Types Associated with Rooms and Areas.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structures Rooms/Areas</th>
<th>Large Limestone Metates</th>
<th>Other Types of Metates</th>
<th>Manos</th>
<th>Large Round Worked Sherds</th>
<th>Spindle Whorls</th>
<th>Perforated Disks etc.</th>
<th>Stone Mortars</th>
<th>Chert Pestles</th>
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*Note:* The table lists the complete or reconstructible objects that appear to have been used or stored by the residents or users of each building, and does not include artifacts that appear to have been refuse or ones found in middens, fills, or open areas away from structures.

Structures M8-4 and M8-8 were most likely elite residences, whereas Structure M8-13 was probably occupied by lower-status individuals. The function of Structure M7-34 is not clear, but it may have served as a communal house. Structures M8-2 and M8-3 may have been workshops, but it is also possible that they were occupied by servants for elite households. All the excavated structures in this area along the Causeway probably had thatched roofs.

Structure M8-4 (*The House of Mirrors*)

This building, which we called "the House of Mirrors," was located next to the Palace Group. The main part of the structure consisted of three rooms—north, central, and south rooms—each with a spacious bench in the rear part (Figures 3 and 4). Thin walls running parallel to the long axis of the building divided the front and rear parts of each room. In the northern parts of the front portions of the north and central rooms were small benches, each with a niche underneath it. The masonry parts of the exterior walls made of roughly shaped blocks appear to have measured 2 to 2.5 m in height and to have directly supported roof beams. On the northern side...
of the structure, excavators found a coarse line of stones defining a rectangular area. It is probable that this area was roofed, and we called it the north addition. Although the main part of the building had raised floors, the floor of the north addition was at the same level as the exterior floor. The floors and bench surfaces of the main rooms were stuccoed, whereas the floor of the north addition does not appear to have had plaster.

The north room contained numerous lithic tools
and several utilitarian vessels, including large storage jars. Found on the northern side of the front porch of this room was a large metate, most likely used for grinding maize. Nine manos and three doughnut stones were neatly stored on the floor in front of the rear bench (Figure 5). These finds suggest that the north room and the nearby space appear to have been associated with food storage and preparation.

A find of interest in the north room was a large plate. Although its shape is similar to a comal, or a griddle for cooking tortillas, its function remains unclear (Figure 6). Current evidence suggests that the Classic lowland Maya consumed maize primarily in the forms of tamales and atol (porridge), whereas their highland neighbors had cooked tortillas since Preclassic times. Comal-like plates start to appear in some lowland sites during the Late and Terminal Classic periods (LeCount 2001:944).
Figure 7. A ceramic flute found in the north room of Structure M8-4 after restoration.

plate from Structure M8-4 does not have remains of soot on the exterior, and use wear is found at the center of the exterior base. If the plate was used as a comal on a three-stone hearth, one would expect heavy burning on the exterior and use wear toward the edge. Similar vessels were found in other excavated structures, but none of them exhibit clear evidence of use as comales. Excavators also unearthed shell ornaments, greenstone beads, and a ceramic flute in this room (Figure 7). A concentration of spindle whorls in the north room points to its association with spinning (Figure 8). A remarkable find was a large, finely made figurine depicting a high-status male, which may represent an ancestral figure of this family (Figure 9).

The number of artifacts found in the central room was relatively small. In front of and on the front bench were one stone pestle and seven stone mortars, each of which fits nicely in one’s hand. Five mortars and the pestle were made of chert, whereas the two other mortars were made of sandstone and possibly metamorphic rock (Figure 8; Inomata 2001c:Figures 6 and 7). Three more chert mortars and one pestle were found near the pillar dividing the central and south rooms and in front of the south room. These objects were probably used for the preparation of pigments, although the analysis of five mortars by Harriet Beaubien (2001) at the Smithsonian Center for Materials Research and Education did not detect unambiguous residues of pigments. There were 12–14 unworked riverine bivalve shells in the same area. It is suggestive that the central room of Structure M8-10 also contained similar shells along with stone mortars. These shells may have been used as ink pots. It appears that a scribe worked.
sitting on the front bench of this room. The quantity of ceramics found in the central room is relatively small, but a small bowl left in the niche under the front bench of this room survived as a complete piece (Figure 10). Two fragments of carved bones uncovered on the back bench of this room had glyphic texts with the Aguateca emblem glyph, pointing to the high status of the residents (Figure 11).

One of the most remarkable finds of the project was an alabaster ornament unearthed on the bench of the south room. Stephen Houston identified it as an image of the Jester God, or a symbol of rulership (Figure 12) (see Freidel 1990). Two holes in the back of the Jester God head were probably for attachment to a head band. There were also small perforations in the nose and chin of the Jester God, to which beads
were probably attached. Associated with this ornament were 11 or 12 square alabaster plaques, also with small perforations for attachment. Stela 19 of Aguateca, recently discovered in the Main Plaza by the Aguateca Project, as well as Stela 7, depict Ruler 5 of Aguateca, Tan Te’ K’inich—possibly the last king of this center—wearing a Jester God headband, with small beads on the nose and chin of the Jester God and square plaques along the band (Figure 12). The depictions of the Jester God on the stelae appear identical to the excavated piece, and one may entertain the thought that the excavated alabaster ornament was the very piece worn by the last ruler of Aguateca and depicted on the stelae. A resident of this structure may have been a high courtier responsible for maintaining royal regalia. Alternatively, the Jester God diadem may have been owned and used by a resident of this building. Although in most cases the use of Jester God images was reserved for rulers, Miller (1986:63) points out that some nobles depicted in the Bonampak murals wear Jester God headbands.

The same room contained more than 300 mosaic pieces of pyrite mirrors. Some pieces were found attached to fragments of a stone mirror back, although the glue had already been lost. The analysis of these materials by Marcelo Zamora and Inomata showed that some mosaic mirror pieces were in the process of being reworked into possible ornaments of rectangular shapes (Figure 13). The entire stages of reworking were represented by the excavated samples. The manufacturer first cut and snapped two longer sides of a rectangular shape. The cut sides were then polished. Finally, the manufacturer cut or polished the shorter sides of the rectangle and further polished the longer sides to give them rounded edges. When mirror mosaic parts were not large enough to make a rectangular shape, two pieces were combined. Finished rectangular ornaments were found next to the Jester God diadem, whereas pieces in the process of reworking were unearthed 30 to 70 cm apart from the carved alabaster (Figure 14). Mosaic mirror pieces that had not been reworked were also found mixed with these reworked objects and in the surrounding areas.

Next to the Jester God ornament, excavators also found four pieces of possible siltstone and one fragment of ceramics that had similar shapes to those of the reworked pyrite objects. In addition, a concentration of 10 pieces of worked bone, each measuring roughly 2 cm in length, was found on the same bench about 1 m to the southeast of the Jester God diadem. One end of each piece was rounded whereas the other end was not smoothed after it was cut and snapped. Interestingly, the rounded ends of most pieces were more severely burned than the other unsmoothed end. It appears that these worked bones were embedded in perishable materials on the unsmoothed ends, which were thus protected from fire. These objects, including the reworked pyrite pieces, siltstone objects, and worked bones, were probably parts of complex composite ornaments, such as headdresses, which were meant to be used.
along with the Jester God headband. A resident of this structure and assistants appear to have been preparing new royal attire or refurbishing existing attire for the next ceremony. The level of iron in the floor of the south room, however, was relatively low, and we did not find debitage from the reworking of pyrite pieces. Interestingly, soil chemistry analysis detected an area of high iron concentration 2 m to the southeast of the structure (Terry et al. 2002). If the manufacturer cut and polished pyrite pieces in the south room, he must have thoroughly collected manufacturing refuse and thrown it outside (see discussion of gender below). Or he may have worked outdoors and brought back unfinished pieces to the south room.

The north addition contained numerous artifacts, including utilitarian ceramic vessels and stone tools. It may have been a working or storage space. Marco Antonio Monroy, who analyzed ceramics from this structure, recognized four round reworked sherds, each measuring 10 to 15 cm in diameter, which were unearthed in the southeastern corner of the north addition and in the nearby areas. Eleven similar objects were also found in the area to the south of the structure (Figure 15). Eight of these reworked sherds were made from bases of large bowls or jars, some with concave cross-sections, and could not have been mirror backs. Burned clay was caked on the exteriors of some pieces, which may be related to a chunk of burned clay found on the southern side. Only two similar reworked sherds were found in the rest of the excavated structures in the Causeway area, and the high number of round reworked sherds appears to be related to a unique activity conducted in and around Structure M8-4. Activities involving the use of clay were probably carried out in these areas, but their precise nature needs to be further examined.

In sum, Structure M8-4 was most likely an elite residence occupied by a high courtier who worked closely with the last ruler of Aguateca. The north room, and possibly the north addition, were related to food storage and preparation. The central room with a relatively small number of artifacts may have been used for meetings and the reception of visitors. The soil phosphate levels in the north room and the north addition are moderately higher than those in

Figure 13. Pyrite artifacts found on the rear bench of the south room of Structure M8-4, indicating the sequence of reworking of mosaic mirror pieces into rectangular ornaments. (a) Mosaic mirror pieces, not reworked; (b) Pieces cut and snapped along the long sides of rectangles. The snapped sides are not polished. The inserted photograph shows a snapped, unpolished side; (c) Pieces cut and polished along the long sides of rectangles. The short sides are not reworked; (d) The long and short sides of rectangles are reworked; (e) Rectangular ornaments, which appear to be finished products. The long sides are further polished, and their corners are rounded.
Figure 14. Distribution of pyrite artifacts in the south room of Structure M8-4. Note that the finished ornaments and pieces in process of reworking were found near the Jester God headband, whereas mosaic mirrors pieces that had not been reworked were scattered throughout the room.

Figure 15. Reworked ceramic sherds found on the exterior floor next to the south wall of Structure M8-4.
the central and south rooms, reflecting this pattern of space use (Terry et al. 2002). A resident also seems to have engaged in scribal or artistic work in the central room. Another important task performed in and around this structure was the preparation and maintenance of possible royal attire, such as a Jester God headband and a headdress.

**Structure M8-8 (The House of Axes)**

This building consisted of three main rooms, which we called the north, central, and south rooms, and of the north and south additions (Figure 16). Like Structure M8-4, the main part of this building had elevated floors, whereas the floors of the north and south additions were at the same level as the exterior floor. The floors and bench surfaces of the main rooms and the north addition were stuccoed, but the floor of the south addition consisted of gravel. Whereas the masonry walls of the main rooms and the north addition appear to have reached the beams, the masonry part of the walls of the south addition probably measured 1 to 1.5 m in height. Although the walls of the main rooms consisted of finely cut stones, the walls of the additions were made of roughly shaped stones. Each room of the main part of the building had a spacious bench in its rear part.

The north room contained numerous artifacts, including large storage jars, serving vessels, and grinding stones (Figures 17 and 18). In front of this room there was a large metate probably used for grinding corn. Thus, the north room appears to have been associated with food storage and preparation. Like the north room of Structure M8-4, there was a concentration of spindle whorls inside and in front of this room (Figure 19). The niche under the bench housed a complete bowl (Inomata 2002:Figure 4.5). Also found in front of the north room were 40 greenstone beads, which were probably parts of a necklace. In the same area, excavators unearthed five polished stone axes (Inomata 2001c:Figure 5).

The central room contained several ceramic vessels on and in front of the bench along the room division with the north room. In addition, a large storage jar was placed on the floor in front of the bench near the room division with the south room. Still, the number of artifacts on the bench was relatively small. We were not able to excavate the niche under the bench because of a large tree standing over it. The number of artifacts in the south room was relatively small, and this room might have been a sleeping and resting space. There was originally a niche under the bench of this room, which had been filled prior to the abandonment.

The north addition probably served as a storage and working space. It contained numerous artifacts, including storage jars, obsidian blades, and 11 polished stone axes (Inomata 2001c:Figure 5). Excavators found a large limestone slab placed on limestone...
blocks in the northeastern corner of the room. The presence of numerous fine incisions on the upper surface indicates that the stone was used as a working surface for cutting (Figure 20). There was a drainage hole in the southeastern corner of the north addition, suggesting the use of water in the room. The south addition contained storage jars and grinding stones. The relatively low level of phosphate in the soil points to the storage function of this room rather than food preparation (Terry et al. 2002). Behind the structure, we found numerous artifacts, including ceramic vessels, figurines, and grinding stones. The area along the back wall of the structure was probably covered by eaves and served as a storage and working space.

In sum, Structure M8-8 was most likely a residence where an elite household slept and prepared
M8-10 (the House of the Scribe) that was excavated in 1993. The building appears to have been disturbed by tree falls. Our excavation revealed two rooms, which we later called the central and west rooms, but the most severely disturbed eastern portion was left unexcavated. Juan Antonio Valdés and Mónica Urquizú of the Guatemalan Restoration Project later excavated this part, revealing the east room. The masonry parts of the walls consisted of roughly shaped blocks, and their original height appears to have been roughly 1 m. Plaster was preserved in some parts of the floors of the central and west rooms, but it was not clear whether the bench floors were stuccoed.

The west room had a bench on the western side instead of the rear part of the room—an unusual pattern at Aguateca. The room contained several utilitarian ceramics, some of which might have been used for cooking. There were two large limestone metates placed inside the room near its front wall. Two manos found in this area fit the metates (Figure 21). Interestingly, one metate was nearly worn through, whereas the other one was quite thick. The residents probably had just obtained a new metate as their old one wore down (Inomata 2002). These grinding stones were most likely used for grinding corn, and the room appears to have been closely associated with food preparation.

The central room was larger than the west room, and its rear was filled with a long bench. Near the room partition with the west room, excavators found a concentration of artifacts, including serving vessels. Yet, a large portion of the room, particularly its central part, was relatively clean of artifacts. This room might have been a living space, or it may also have been used for meetings and receiving visitors. To the west of the west room was a dense midden, which continued to the southern wall of Structure M8-10. It appears that most materials of this midden were discarded by the residents of Structure M8-10. Some materials of this midden had been washed down to the area behind Structure M8-13.

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The artifact assemblage from Structure M8-13 appears to be similar to those from the excavated elite residences (Structures M7-35, M8-4, M8-8, and M8-10) in terms of objects related to essential domestic activities, such as food storage and preparation. Yet, the number of valuable goods, such as jade beads and fine shell ornaments was extremely small, which stands in contrast with the abundance of such mate-
rials in the elite residences. In addition, the quality of construction of Structure M8-13 was lower. The building was probably a residence occupied by a lower-status household.

Structures M8-2 and M8-3

The walls of these small, single-room buildings were made of roughly shaped stones and the original height of the masonry appears to have been about 1 m. The floors do not seem to have been stuccoed. Whereas Structure M8-2 did not have benches, Structure M8-3 was furnished with a C-shaped bench (Figure 22).

Structure M8-2 contained a relatively small number of ceramic vessels and lithic tools. A deposit to the west of the structure showed high concentrations of phosphate and appears to have been a midden (Terry et al. 2002). In the areas behind the building, excavators found several partial vessels, as well as numerous shell ornaments. Since Structures M8-2 and M8-3 contained few shell ornaments, these materials found behind Structure M8-2 may have fallen from the Palace Group. In front of the building, excavators detected a burial without capstones, which we did not excavate.4

The number of artifacts found in Structure M8-3 was relatively small. A unique find was a small ball (roughly 3 cm in diameter) of red pigment made of specular hematite. Excavators found two rectangular flat limestone slabs and two long flat limestone
slabs, along with three manos. These stones appear to have been used for grinding, pounding, or pressing some materials, but their precise function is not clear.

The function of Structures M8-2 and M8-3 remains unclear. One possibility is that they were residences of low-status individuals. The presence of a burial in front of Structure M8-2 may support this hypothesis. Another possibility is that they were manufacturing areas. The presence of unique grinding stones and pigment associated with Structure M8-3, as well as the high levels of iron and copper in soils to the east of Structure M8-3, may point to this function (Terry et al. 2002).

Structure M7-34 (The House of Metates)

Structure M7-34 faced the Causeway and was surrounded by stone walls (Inomata et al. 1998:Figures 8 and 9). The building consisted of three rooms, which we called the north, central, and south rooms. Each room was divided into front and rear parts by walls placed parallel to the axis of the building. The large part of the rear section of each room was filled with a high bench. The floors of Structure M7-34 appear to have had thin stucco. The walls were made of cut stones and roughly shaped blocks, and masonry may have reached the beams. Structure M7-34 was similar to Structure M8-11 in terms of their floor plans and their locations facing the Causeway (Inomata and Stiver 1998).

In contrast to Structures M7-35, M8-4, M8-8, and M8-10, functional differences between the rooms of this building were not clear. Of particular interest were seven large metates made of limestone. Some fragments of metates found near Structure M8-8 may have originally been used in front of Structure M7-34, and they may have fallen down the slope. In front of the north and central rooms, we found two elaborate incense burners (Inomata et al. 1998:Figure 10). We have not found any elaborate incense burners in the likely residential buildings (Structures M7-35, M8-4, M8-8, M8-10, and M8-13), although one simpler example was uncovered in Structure M8-17, a possible shrine (Inomata and Stiver 1998).

In front of the walls surrounding Structure M7-34, excavators found lines of stones surrounding two small areas. There may have been small huts in these areas, and we preliminarily named them Structures M7-91 and M7-92. There were four metates associated with partially excavated Structure M7-91, and one in Structure M7-92. If these lines of stones were indeed bases for structures, they may have been
added at the last stage of the Late Classic occupation of Aguateca. By that time, defensive walls had blocked the Causeway, and the Causeway may have lost its original function.

The unusually large number of metates and the presence of an elaborate incense burners set Structure M7-34 apart from the probable elite residences. Ringle and Bey (2001:276) suggest that colonnaded halls of Mayapán with abundant remains of incense burners were _popol nahs_ (council houses documented in Colonial sources) (see also Fash et al. 1992). Although we are reluctant to equate Structure M7-34 of Aguateca with Colonial-period _popol nahs_, it probably served as a communal house of some kind that was used for feasting, gatherings, or rituals.

**Discussion**

**Abandonment of the Center**

Excavations by the Aguateca Archaeological Project confirmed the earlier hypothesis that the elite residential area along the Causeway was burned and abandoned rapidly due to an attack by enemies. All the excavated buildings in the area exhibited clear evidence of burning, and all the elaborately built structures contained valuable goods. The presence of such items as greenstone beads, carved alabaster, and shell ornaments indicated that the abandonment of the area was extremely rapid (see Cameron and Tomka 1993; Schiffer 1987; Stevenson 1982).

This, however, does not mean that the residents of Aguateca were not aware of the possibility of an enemy attack. They built a series of defensive walls, some of which blocked the Causeway and substantially changed the spatial organization of the center. As we examine the organizations of households and of the center through archaeological materials from the final moment of the occupation, we need to evaluate how they were affected by this tense circumstance. The results of the excavations of the Palace Group suggested to us that the royal family evacuated the center before the attack, which probably caused substantial disruptions in the daily routines of courtiers (Inomata 2002). We, however, suspect that the remaining residents of the epicenter essentially maintained patterns of traditional life in their residences. The use of space is consistent among the excavated elite residences, which suggests that traditional occupancy patterns continued. In other words, there is not clear evidence that a substantial number of the population moved into the most heavily defended epicenter from other parts of the center. Nor does it appear that many courtiers abandoned the center before the attack. Elite residents kept their scribal implements and carving tools in orderly manners, and they may still have been practicing such courtly activities as painting codices. In particular, the pyrite data from Structure M8-4 indicate that a resident of this structure was preparing ceremonial attire for the ruler until the final fall of the center. It is probable that the sequence of events from the construction of defensive walls to the evacuation of the royal family and the final attack all took place in a short period of time.

In some areas, including the south room of Structure M8-4 and the front yard of Structure M7-34, there were fragments of ceramic vessels and other artifacts scattered over wide areas. It is possible that some objects were disturbed by the residents in the frenzy of abandonment or by the enemies who attacked Aguateca. Although some of the most important or valuable items may have been carried away, a significant portion of the original household assemblages remained near their locations of storage or use. The invaders probably conducted termination rituals at the Palace Group, but they did not stay long in the center (Inomata 2002). They did not leave clearly recognizable material signatures of their occupation at Aguateca. The entire center was deserted soon after the attack, and the enemies may have forbidden the residents of Aguateca and surrounding populations to return to or visit this place. Numerous durable objects of high value, such as greenstone ornaments and polished stone axes, which would have been primary targets of postabandonment scavenging, remained undisturbed.

**Use of Space and Activities**

Although many of the excavated objects were probably in the locations of storage rather than use, their distribution patterns provide significant clues about the association of rooms and areas with specific activities and individuals. The use of space inferred from these data is consistent among the multichambered elite residences, i.e., Structures M7-35, M8-4, M8-8, and M8-10. Like in Structures M7-35 and M8-10, a significant part of the central rooms of Structures M8-4 and M8-8 were kept free of objects, and ceramics found in these rooms include medium-sized jars for beverages and serving vessels, such as plates,
bouls, and vases. These distribution patterns accord with the argument that the central rooms served for meetings and the reception of visitors (Inomata 1995, 2001b; Inomata and Stiver 1998). Inomata (2001b) has suggested that some palace scenes depicted on ceramic vases took place in the central rooms of elite residences. The sets of ceramic vessels rendered in vase paintings appear roughly parallel to the archaeological assemblages from the central rooms of the Aguateca structures. According to Bishop Landa, the Colonial-period Maya in Yucatan usually held political meetings in the houses of elites (Tozzer 1941: 87). Such practices can probably be traced back to the Classic period. Another point of similarity between the central rooms of Structures M8-10 and M8-4 is the presence of scribal implements. Some political gatherings may have involved record-keeping by scribes. It is also possible that a resident conducted scribal or artistic work in the central room on a regular basis.

The majority of the vase paintings of palace-meeting scenes depicts a male as a protagonist sitting on a bench. Although Coe (Coe and Kerr 1997) and Closs (1992) have suggested the existence of female scribes, there are no indisputable references to female scribes in glyphic texts (Stephen Houston, personal communication 2001). It is, then, likely that individuals who used the central rooms for political meetings and scribal work were in most cases males, although the current evidence does not necessarily negate other possibilities. The presence of an extended male burial under the floor of the central room of Structure M8-10 may imply the primary association of the chamber with males through generations (Inomata and Stiver 1998).

Evidence of scribal and artistic work was also found in the south room of Structure M8-10, as well as in the north room of Structure M8-10. Inomata (2001c) has argued that a considerable portion of Classic Maya elites engaged in scribal and artistic tasks and that such creative activities had significant implications for the distinctions of elites from the rest of society and for power struggles among courtiers (see also Coe 1977; Coe and Kerr 1997; Reents-Budet 1994; Stuart 1989; Webster 1989). If this assumption is correct, the same individuals who used the central rooms for political meetings may have conducted scribal and artistic work in these side rooms, although other members of the households and apprentices may have assisted them. In Structures M8-8 and M7-35, however, such patterns were not clear. This ambiguity may be partly due to the nature of artistic activities conducted by the residents of these structures. If the interpretation that the polished axes found in Structure M8-8 served for carving stelae is correct, the acts of carving themselves did not take place in the building, but in the Main Plaza.

Like the west room of Structure M7-35 and the south room of Structure M8-10, the storage and preparation of food in the north rooms of Structures M8-4 and M8-8 are indicated by the large quantity of ceramic vessels, including storage jars, and the presence of large metates in the nearby areas. Except for Structure M7-35 which contained few spindle whorls, concentrations of spindle whorls in and around these rooms are noticeable (Figures 8 and 19) (Inomata and Stiver 1998: Figure 6). Although we need to be aware of the possibility that some of these objects were used as flywheels for drilling (Kovacevich et al. 2002), most of them were probably related to textile production. It has been suggested that in Classic Maya society, food preparation and textile production were conducted by females (Hendon 1992, 1997; Joyce 1992a, 1992b, 1993). These rooms containing objects for food preparation and textile production were probably associated closely with females.

These data indicate that there were relatively clear divisions—but not strict segregation—of spaces associated with men and women. Similar spatial configurations may be found in other areas of Mesoamerica and in different time periods, including Formative Oaxaca (Flannery and Winter 1976) and modern Zinacantan (Vogt 1969:83–84). In this regard, our conclusion differs from Hendon’s (1997), who has argued that there were not divisions of male and female spaces in domestic compounds through her analysis of spindle whorls, perforated sherds, and pointed bone objects from Groups 9M-22, 9M-24, and 9N-8 of Copán. We believe that her interpretation results from the lack of consideration of formation processes (see Schiffer 1987). The groups that she examined were abandoned gradually with the possible exceptions of Structures 9M-22, 9M-24, and 9N-8 of Copán. We believe that her interpretation results from the lack of consideration of formation processes (see Schiffer 1987). The groups that she examined were abandoned gradually with the possible exceptions of Structures 9N-81 and 9N-110B (Webster 1989). In these cases, the distribution of objects primarily represents the locations of their discard rather than of use or storage. In addition, a significant portion of durable tools, such as spindle whorls made of stone, was probably carried...
away at the time of abandonment, and the remain-
ing objects may have been significantly disturbed. Moreover, the functions of certain objects that she
analyzed remain ambiguous. Whereas we can rea-
sonably assume that most of the round, perforated
objects with hemispherical cross-sections were used
as spindle whorls, some perforated sherds and
pointed bone tools may have been used for other
purposes than textile production. The apparent lack
of divisions of male and female spaces at the Copán
residential compounds, then, probably reflects the
lack of resolution of the data rather than the reality
of past practices.

Organization of Domestic Groups

The occupancy pattern of multichambered structures
in the Maya lowlands has been a vexing problem.
One hypothesis is that a household occupied a sin-
gle room and a structure accommodated multiple
households, while another is that an entire structure
was used by a single household (see Becquelin and
Michelet 1994; Tourtellot et al. 1990; Webster and
Freter 1990). The spatial configurations of the exca-
vated elite residences at Aguateca accord with the
latter hypothesis, although there was probably a cer-
tain level of flexibility and variability between dif-
ferent elite households. If a single structure was
occupied by multiple households, one would expect
functional redundancy between different rooms.
Instead, the foregoing discussion shows that activi-
ties carried out in different parts of each elite resi-
dential structure were complementary to each other.
An elite residential structure as a whole provided
spaces for a broad range of activities, including artis-
tic production, political meetings, and the storage,
preparation, and consumption of food. Thus, the
occupants of a single residence constituted an impor-
tant group that shared economic resources and col-
laborated in daily activities. Such a group may be
called a household.

The households that occupied the excavated
Aguateca structures constituted relatively well-
deﬁned economic units. Structures M8-4, M8-8, M8-
10, and M8-13 were located next to each other, but
their residents stored and prepared their food sepa-
ately (Triadan 2000). In particular, Structures M8-
10 and M8-13 that faced the same patio exhibited a
marked difference in the quantity of valuable goods,
such as greenstone and shell ornaments.

A common composition of elite households at
Aguateca may have been a nuclear family, although
the makeup of their members certainly changed
through time and varied among households (see
Goody 1958). This interpretation is based on the
analysis of space use and of possible sleeping areas.
The front benches of Structure M8-4, which were
exposed to winds and outsiders’ view, do not seem to
have been used for sleeping. The room floors in front
of the rear benches appear too small or too crowded
with objects to have been sleeping spaces. Thus, as
has often been argued for various Maya sites, the res-
idents probably slept on benches in the rear parts of
the room (e.g., Harrison 2001). Some of those
benches in the Aguateca structures were occupied by
numerous objects, further reducing potential sleep-
ing spaces. It appears unlikely that a great number
of high-status individuals substantially larger than
nuclear families shared the rather limited sleeping
spaces. The hypothesized division of male and female
spaces is also consonant with household composition
consisting of a conjugal pair and their children.

Some elites probably practiced polygamy,
although evidence is not clear in the archaeological
record. In this regard, we should mention that the
use of space in Structure M8-13 is different from
the elite residences discussed above. There were
three spindle whorls inside and in front of the cen-
tral room of this structure, whereas the west room
contained only one. Was this structure occupied by
one of the wives of the polygamous male of Struc-
ture M8-10? Or did households of different classes
practice different use of space? Excavations under
the floors of the central and west rooms of this struc-
ture did not reveal burials, which would have helped
resolve this problem.

Our understanding of relations between house-
holds and other types of domestic groups at Aguateca
is more limited. This is partly because in the Aguateca
epicenter the structures built in the narrow areas
between the Causeway and the escarpment do not
form clear patio groups. Nevertheless, there must
have been social groups and networks that nested or
cross-cut households. It has been noted that many
patio groups at various centers included shrine-like
buildings (Becker 1971; Webster 1989). The func-
tion of Structure M8-17 may be comparable to such
buildings, and the residents of adjacent structures
may have constituted units of religious beliefs and
practices (Inomata and Stiver 1998). They might also
have cooperated in other matters, including land-
holding and political competition at the court (see Hendon 1991; Joyce 2000; McAnany 1995). In addition, Structure M7-34 as a communal house appears to have been a place for gatherings of a large group, which may or may not be based on kinship.

**Comparison with Non-Elite Residences**

Structures outside of the Aguateca epicenter were not burned and contained few artifacts. The vast difference in abandonment processes makes a comparison between elite residences and nonelite structures difficult. The functions of Structures M8-2 and M8-3, whether they were residences of servants or workshops, were closely tied to the courtly lives of the elites and are probably not comparable to those of common nonelite structures found in the rest of the site. Thus, we need to turn to other sites for comparable data on nonelite residences. Excavations by Sheets (1992) at Cerén, El Salvador, a rural settlement covered by volcanic ash, have revealed structures significantly smaller than those of Aguateca elite residences. According to Sheets, Household 1 at least occupied a domicile, a storehouse, a kitchen, and a workshop, whereas Household 2 used a domicile and a storehouse. This pattern is comparable to those of elite residences of Aguateca in three respects. First, single households occupied multiple spatial units of complementary functions. In other words, each small building of Cerén corresponds roughly with a single room of the Aguateca structures in terms of its functions. Second, sleeping areas in comparison with spaces dedicated to cooking, storage, and other work were relatively small at both sites, implying that each household consisted of a relatively small number of individuals. Third, each household was an important economic unit that stored and prepared its own food.

These observations point to critical issues that need to be addressed as we further examine the organization of nonelite households at Aguateca and other sites. One issue is that many population estimates based on the figures of 4–5.6 people per structure may be too high if a significant space within a residential-structure group served for functions other than sleeping and resting. Another issue is that, although the prevalence of patio groups has led many scholars to assume a common composition of a Classic Maya household consisting of an extended family or other types of large group, the importance of small groups of individuals in daily activities should be further evaluated.

**Politics and Domestic Lives**

Elite residences at Aguateca were places not only for private lives and mundane domestic activities but also for political meetings and for scribal and artistic production. In other words, they were arenas for political interactions among courtiers, for the display of status and wealth, and for the creation of power and prestige through artistic production (Inomata 2001b, 2001c). What we call domestic/private spheres and political/public spheres intersected and merged in practices of the same individuals in the spatial framework of elite residences.

Males may have generally played more visible roles in such political interactions and displays than females, which is suggested by paintings on numerous ceramic vases. The relative scarcity—but not the absence—of female-related objects in the central rooms of the elite buildings at Aguateca accords with such iconographic data. This, however, does not mean the exclusion of females from such political interactions. In Structure M8-4, the north room with a concentration of spindle whorls, as well as the central room, were equipped with a front bench, which was probably a primary stage for interactions and display involving individuals from outside the household. One possible interpretation is that the use of space at the time of the construction of the front bench of the north room was different from that immediately before the abandonment reflected in the distribution of floor assemblages. It is also possible that the female who used this room presided at certain political meetings and the reception of visitors.

Daily practices in residences also reflect the larger structures of political relations and ideologies, and contribute to shape such broader patterns (Bourdieu 1977). The royal court probably had an aspect as the household of the ruler, and the administration of the polity may have been an extension of the management of the royal household (Inomata and Houston 2001; McAnany and Plank 2001; Sanders and Webster 1988). The plans of royal buildings were comparable to those of other elite residences, with the emphasis on the central rooms flanked by other chambers, as well as the arrangement of structures surrounding patios. Political gatherings in elite residences probably mirrored courtly events and inter-dynastic diplomacy that took place in royal residences. Houston (1998) has noted that the vertical positioning of figures on the bench, floor, and
stairs in palace-meeting scenes of vase paintings reflects relative status differentiations among the participants. As the royal events served to assert the political and symbolic supremacy of the ruler, the interactions in elite residences were processes of imposition and negotiation of asymmetrical power relations between different groups and individuals.

Conclusion

The archaeological study of the organization of households, daily practices of their members, and the structures and ideologies underlying them is not an easy task even when we have the relatively favorable condition of a rapidly abandoned site (see Allison 1999). Nonetheless, rich floor assemblages from such a site allow a higher-resolution analysis and a deeper contextual understanding than in common archaeological situations. Although we should be aware of variability in domestic organization within a community and between different regions and time periods, detailed data from a rapidly abandoned site provide useful reference data for the interpretation of finds at other sites. In addition, the data of rich floor assemblages can serve as a baseline for evaluating formation processes in more gradually abandoned sites.

The extensive excavations in the rapidly abandoned epicenter of Aguateca provided extraordinary data on political and domestic lives of Classic Maya elites. The residents of an elite structure conducted a wide range of mundane activities, including the storage, preparation, and consumption of food. Elite residences were also spaces for political gatherings and artistic production. A male resident may have used the central room for meetings and one of the side rooms for scribal and artistic work, whereas the other side room containing a larger quantity of ceramic vessels and spindle whorls seems to have been more closely associated with a female. This spatial configuration and the routines of daily practices within it were material and bodily expressions of cultural notions regarding certain aspects of social relations among different individuals and groups. They were, at the same time, processes in which these relations were reproduced. Data from Aguateca also indicate that elite residences were spaces where what is called the private and domestic spheres intersected and merged with the political and public spheres. These buildings and surrounding areas were not only spatial frameworks in which individuals lived and experienced a significant part of their lives, but also were arenas where crucial processes of the operation of the polity and court unfolded.

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Notes
1. The supervisors for these operations were: Ponciano and Pinto for Structure M7-34, Triadan for Structures M8-4 and M8-8, Inomata and Triadan for Structures M8-2 and M8-3, and Ponciano, Inomata, and Triadan for Structure M8-13.
2. We gave easily remembered names to some of the excavated structures. These names do not have functional implications.
3. In this article, spindle whorls refer only to perforated, round objects with roughly hemispherical cross-sections. Perforated round sherds are often interpreted as spindle whorls; some of them with irregular shapes and without straight holes may have served other functions. There were no perforated, round sherds in Structure M8-4.
4. In 1998 and 1999 parts of the Aguateca National Park were occupied by groups of indigenous people who demanded lands. Under the tense circumstance, we decided not to excavate burials.
5. The number of burials in structures at Aguateca seems relatively small, which is probably due to the short occupation of the center.