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Identifying and Analyzing the Use of Space in Ancient Mayan House Mounds in Kancab, Yucatan, Mexico

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For my project, I proposed to test two Pre-Columbian Mayan house-mounds to identify potential activity areas by grid testing. This method involved digging 50cm by 50cm pits around the selected house mounds in a grid with 5 meter spacing. I proposed to grid test two mounds – one large mound and one small mound (by volume) – and compare the amount of ceramic recovered from these pits to identify potential activity areas. Many Mayan archaeologists have suggested that larger mounds (greater than 1m long), including those using megalithic construction style (constructed with stones), were likely occupied by more wealthy or affluent people. This is important, because megalithic construction only occurs in this region of the Mayan world. In the area to the north of the site center, approximately 16.4% of the surveyed and mapped house-mounds are constructed with megalithic stones. My project is therefore comparing the activity areas at homes of people of different economic standing. I selected mounds based on volume of the mound, distance from site center, identification as a house-mound, direction from the site center, and location in forest instead of in cultivated fields. The mounds needed to be similar in most other attributes (distance from the center of the archaeological site, direction from the center of the site, grid tested to the same distance, etc.) in order to lessen the impact of other, unaccounted for variables. By comparing the ceramic densities of the areas around these house mounds, I hope to identify differences in the activities completed around the homes of ancient Mayans of different economic statuses.

For the first three weeks of the field season, archaeologically surveyed the area to the north of the center of the site of Kancab. During survey, we discovered an abundance of mounds from which I chose house-mounds to test. I chose one large mound complex that consisted of four different mounds (all of which had megalithic stones) spaced at a distance of less than 10 meters from each other, and one small mound that was not constructed with any megalithic stones and did not have any other near-by mounds with which to form a compound. Both of these test sites were located north of the center of the site and are located approximately 125 meters apart. In as many aspects as I could manage, these house-mound structures were equal with the exception of size and therefore, the economic standing of the people that once lived there.

Grid testing took three weeks to complete. The entire process included setting out a grid with stakes every five meters, demarcating a 50 cm by 50 cm pit at every stake, and excavating in 20 cm levels until either bedrock or large rocks made continuing excavation at that spot impossible. Artifacts, items created or modified by humans, were collected from a ¼ inch screen in which the excavated dirt was sifted and segregated according to 20 cm level and test pit from which they came. This technique of excavating allows for greater control of the exact context from which the artifacts come due to their vertical and thereby temporal association within a given test pit. I dug, with the aid of local workmen, a total of 173 test pits to an average depth of 28.09 centimeters. I collected a total 301 grams of ceramic shards. All of these shards came from the excavations at the first mound complex.

To completely cover the area around the mounds, the grid radiated outward 15 meters from the mound, or a distance of three stakes. We did not place pits on mounds. In the first, large complex of mounds, this three stake distance had to be completed around all four mounds in the complex as well as between the mounds. Because the second, small, singular mound complex had only
one structure, the staking was much less extensive because there was less area necessary to cover. The total number of pits at the first complex was 124 while the number of pits at the second complex was only 49.

My project produced ceramics and soil samples that will be used to compare activities and wealth between the first and second mound complexes. By analyzing and mapping the locations of the ceramics as well as how phosphorus levels varied across the site, a broader picture of everyday Mayan life at the level of the household can be explored. Because these different mound complexes have been identified as being of different economic standings (large complex with megalithic architecture versus single, small mound), these activities will also indicate what privileges wealth in ancient Maya society might have allowed its owners.

This project has not only provided me with an opportunity to design and complete my own research project but has also provided me with invaluable field experience in this area. I’ve learned how to manage groups of people in a work environment and continuing to see how my initial plan has melded into my own project has been an experience all itself. While my project has stayed mostly true to my initial research plan, experiencing the breadth of variables and potential influences will be important in planning future projects.