



Research Article

Conquest and revival at Chiantla Viejo: the transition of a highland Maya community to Spanish colonial rule

Victor Castillo* 

* Institute of Archaeology, Jagiellonian University, Kraków, Poland (✉ quensanto@gmail.com)



Colonised societies often continue traditional practices in private contexts whilst adopting new forms of ritual in public. Excavations at the Mam centre of Chiantla Viejo in highland Guatemala, however, reveal a more complex picture. Combining archaeological evidence with early colonial documents, the author identifies a revival of Indigenous Maya religion following the Spanish conquest (AD 1525–1550). Despite appearing in colonial records as Christian converts, the Maya directed a sequence of destruction, reconstruction and remodelling of the monumental core of Chiantla Viejo to evoke the landscape of their ancestral settlement of Zaculeu. The results emphasise the importance of public spaces for the persistence of Indigenous religion in early colonial settings.

Keywords: Mesoamerica, Maya, religion, ritual, Christianity, architecture

Introduction

Archaeology is well suited to studying the continuity of indigenous culture and religion in the face of expanding colonial powers. For the Americas, archaeologists have argued that changes in response to colonialism were most visible in the public realm, with the continuity of native practices focused on the domestic sphere (e.g. Deagan 1973, 2003; Spores & Robles García 2007; Voss 2008; Abraham 2017). Hidden out of sight of the colonial authorities in commoners' houses, secret shrines, agricultural settings and caves, for example, household and private ritual practices ensured the persistence of indigenous religion (e.g. Farriss 1984: 286–319; Chuchiak 2009; Stone 2009; Oland 2017). Recent archaeological and historical research at Chiantla Viejo, a small ceremonial centre in the Mam Maya-speaking region of western Guatemala, however, shows that native religious practices were maintained through

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public rituals held in the shared central spaces of settlements during the decades following the arrival of the Spaniards in the Maya highlands.

Excavations at Chiantla Viejo have revealed that the construction and renovation of indigenous public ritual architecture was pursued steadfastly, first after the invasion and military conquest in the mid fifteenth century AD by the K'iche' Maya—a powerful expansionist highland Maya group—and then in the years following the Spanish conquest in the sixteenth century. The Indigenous inhabitants of Chiantla Viejo drew on social memory, taking inspiration from the spatial and architectural arrangements of Zaculeu, a nearby major ceremonial centre considered to be the capital of the 'Mam kingdom' (Woodbury & Trik 1953). During and after both the K'iche' and then the Spanish conquests, the Mam created and then recreated a settlement at Chiantla Viejo in the image of the main plaza of Zaculeu, albeit at a modest scale and with some modifications owed to Chiantla Viejo's uneven terrain. Intriguingly, the revival of pre-Hispanic public ritual architecture at Chiantla Viejo in early colonial times took place when the Spanish considered the local Mam lords to be newly converted Christians.

Research at Chiantla Viejo indicates that social memory offered a vehicle for the emulation of the public ritual architecture of a regional capital in a small community that faced aggressive military conquests and the imposition of a new religion. This "creation of continuity" (Pugh 2002: 301–306) strengthened a connection between ancient ritual places of power and new centres that emerged as a result of warfare and displacement.

Early Christianisation in the Maya area

Traditional narratives about religious change in the New World during the Spanish conquest have followed the tenets of the 'spiritual conquest', a metaphor used to complement the military conquest of the Americas (Ricard 1966; Restall 2003: 74; Tavárez 2019). Historical and ethnographic data, however, clearly show that this spiritual enterprise did not work out in practice as the Spanish expected. Indigenous worldviews and ritual practices not only survived the initial conquest and early colonial phase, but also continued throughout colonial times and into the present day (Miller & Farriss 1979: 223–29; Alexander *et al.* 2018). Regarding the introduction of Christianity and wider contact-era developments, the Maya lowlands have received more attention from archaeologists than have the highlands. In the lowland areas, relatively soon after the Spanish invasion, early Christian churches were constructed at Maya centres (Folan 1970: 187–90; Miller & Farriss 1979: 223–29; Graham 2011: 189–283 & 199–232; Pugh *et al.* 2016: 55–56). In central Petén, the east coast of the Yucatán peninsula and northern Belize, archaeological research has documented that indigenous ritual practices continued to be practised both publicly and privately within the grounds of the Christian missions, alongside experimentation with European objects in indigenous ritual contexts through the adoption of Christian architecture and burial practices in public ritual settings (e.g. Pugh 2009; Graham 2011: 9–28 & 232–36; Pugh *et al.* 2012, 2016; Oland & Palka 2016; Oland 2017; Awe & Helmke 2019). For the Maya highlands, archaeological evidence of such changes in building and ritual practices is absent due to a lack of excavations of early colonial contexts. In this respect, the data from Chiantla Viejo offer an unparalleled insight into the ritual practices of highland Maya communities in the transitional period

between pre-Hispanic displacement and the Spanish invasion, with its concomitant relocation of Maya groups by Spanish missionaries to new colonial towns in the mid sixteenth century.

Chiantla Viejo: a site between two conquests

The archaeological site known today as Chiantla Viejo, in the Maya highlands of western Guatemala (Figure 1), corresponds to the conquest-era settlement named Chiantla. Historical records (see below) refer to events concerning Chiantla's pre-Hispanic and conquest-period Mam community. Briefly, during the mid fifteenth century AD, the Mam were conquered by a neighbouring highland Maya group known as the K'iche', leading to the establishment of new centres in the mountains to which the Mam population relocated. The arrival of the Spanish conquistadors in the region in AD 1525 neutralised the threat of the K'iche' and, in an attempt to return to their original home in and around Zaculeu in the valley of Huehuetenango, the Mam population deliberately burnt Chiantla Viejo in AD 1530, along with other mountain centres. Within a few years, however, Chiantla Viejo had been refounded, before the Mam were finally relocated by missionaries to a new colonial settlement near Zaculeu (Table 1).

The indications concerning the pre-conquest history of Chiantla are found in the records of a lawsuit between two Spanish conquistadors, Juan de Espinar and Pedro de Alvarado. The lawsuit concerned the subject towns of the *encomienda* of Huehuetenango (*Archivo General de Indias: Justicia 1031*, hereafter cited as *Justicia 1031*; discussed in Kramer 1994; Kramer *et al.* 1991; Lovell *et al.* 2013: 129–48; Castillo 2021). The *encomienda* was a Spanish colonial institution by which an individual, usually a conquistador or his descendants, was granted labour and tribute from a native community as a reward for his services to the Spanish crown (Kramer 1994: 11). These *encomiendas* incorporated existing social and economic structures in which Indigenous nobles played an important role.

According to the testimonies recorded as part of the judicial procedure in *Justicia 1031*, the Mam community of Chiantla intentionally set fire to the settlement in the first months of AD 1530, after which the Mam lords and commoners of Chiantla and other communities relocated to Zaculeu (Zacualpa Huehuetenango in *Justicia 1031*; Kramer 1994: 213), an important centre that had been abandoned in AD 1525 due to the arrival of the Spanish. Zaculeu, the largest regional ceremonial centre in the valley, was established *c.* AD 500 and was continuously occupied until the Spanish invasion in the sixteenth century (Woodbury & Trik 1953) (Table 1). When questioned by Spanish justices about their immediate pre-Hispanic history, the Mam nobles of the Huehuetenango *encomienda* recounted how, not long before the arrival of the Spanish, the K'iche' Maya of Q'umark'aa, a powerful neighbouring highland Maya group, had invaded Mam territory. The K'iche' forced the Mam to abandon Zaculeu and the plains around it, displacing the population into the mountains to the north, where a series of new civic and ceremonial centres in defensible locations, including Chiantla Viejo, emerged during the mid fifteenth century (Fox 1983: 125–53). Zaculeu was taken over by K'iche' warriors, who temporarily occupied the site. The archaeological evidence for this short K'iche' occupation at Zaculeu, however, is unclear, and when the

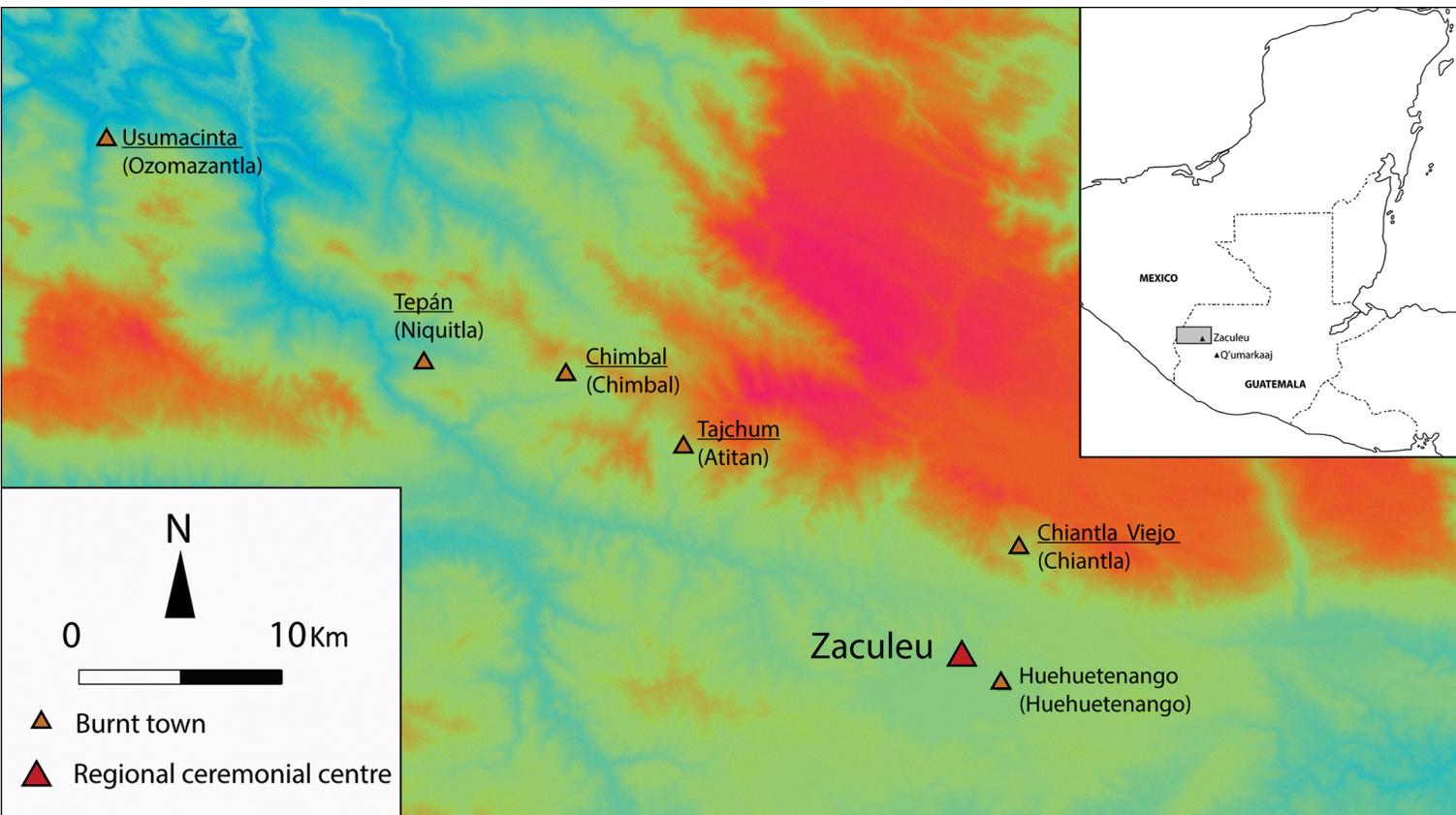


Figure 1. Towns of Huehuetenango burnt in AD 1530. Modern names of archaeological sites are underlined. Historical names recorded in Justicia 1031 are in parentheses (illustration by V. Castillo).

Table 1. Timeline of events.

Date	Zaculeu	Mountain centres	Chiantla Viejo
<i>c.</i> AD 500	Foundation of Zaculeu.	Probable Classic occupation.	Probable Classic occupation.
<i>c.</i> AD 1450	K'iche' conquest of the Mam. The Mam population was forced out of Zaculeu and the valley of Huehuetenango. Temporary K'iche' occupation of Zaculeu.	Foundation of mountain centres by displaced Mam, including Chiantla Viejo, probably in the location of abandoned Classic sites.	Stage I: <i>c.</i> AD 1450–1530
AD 1525	The Mam are back in full control of Zaculeu after the K'iche' conquest, although conflict among the two groups persists. Spanish conquest and first Spanish relocation of the Mam away from Zaculeu. Encomienda of Huehuetenango granted in October 1525 to Juan de Espinar.	The encomienda of Huehuetenango granted to Juan de Espinar in October 1525 included the mountain centres.	
AD 1530	Reoccupation of Zaculeu by the Mam of the mountain centres.	Burning and first abandonment of the mountain centres, including Chiantla Viejo. Mam population returns to Zaculeu and the valley.	Burning horizon
<i>c.</i> AD 1531–1537	Second and final Spanish relocation of the Mam away from Zaculeu to resettle Mam population back in mountain centres.	Reconstruction and reoccupation of burnt mountain centres, including Chiantla Viejo.	Stage II: post-fire (a) and Stage III: post-fire (b)
<i>c.</i> AD 1550	Zaculeu remained abandoned.	Final abandonment of mountain centres, and relocation of population to new colonial towns.	Final abandonment

Spanish arrived in AD 1525, Zaculeu was again under the control of the Mam population and independent from the K'iche' (Woodbury & Trik 1953: 10).

Although *Justicia 1031* does not explicitly address the Spanish invasion, we know that the conquistadors and their Indigenous allies arrived in the valley of Huehuetenango in AD 1525, less than a century after the K'iche' conquest (Woodbury & Trik 1953: 9–20). The Spanish besieged and eventually defeated Zaculeu, which by that point had been regained from the K'iche' by the Mam. Subsequently, the site and others in the Huehuetenango Valley, as well as the mountain centres, including Chiantla Viejo, were granted in encomienda to the conquistador Juan de Espinar in October 1525 (Lovell *et al.* 2013: 130–34).

Shortly thereafter, the Mam lords claimed that, since the recent Spanish invasion had ended the constant wars with the K'iche', they wished to move back to Zaculeu and their ancestral homeland (Lovell *et al.* 2013: 144–48). *Justicia 1031* reports that the Mam lords conceived the burning of their mountain centres and the relocation of the population to the Huehuetenango Valley as an attempt to return to a landscape that was lost after the conquest of the area by the K'iche'.

Early Maya Christians

Five years after the Spanish invasion of 1525, the remaining Mam burnt their mountain towns and moved back—temporarily as it turned out—to the Huehuetenango Valley. In AD 1530, the burning of towns subject to the encomienda of Huehuetenango resulted in a series of judicial inquiries from Spanish authorities regarding the political organisation of the Mam. In the first round of testimonies recorded in AD 1530, the nobles of the encomienda of Huehuetenango were named with Nahua and Maya names. These include Ollin and Mazatl, lords of Huehuetenango; Cotoha, high official and interpreter; Atunal, interpreter; Coatle, lord of Chiantla; Chimal and Zamaza, lords of Chimbal; and the names of the lords and interpreters of other Mam polities independent of the encomienda of Huehuetenango. Seven years later, in AD 1537, Mam nobles from the encomienda of Huehuetenango were called to testify on behalf of Juan de Espinar, their *encomendero*, for a further round of investigations in the newly established Spanish city of Santiago de Guatemala. This time, the nobles were introduced in court as 'Christian Indians' with Spanish names—a clear indication that they had been baptised and now possessed the legal capacity to swear an oath in court. These included Don Francisco, lord of Huehuetenango; Anton, principal Indian of Huehuetenango; Juan, interpreter and principal Indian; and a commoner named Pedro. Where the testimonies of these nobles were recorded individually, the Spanish notary added the phrase *indio que dice ser Cristiano* ('Indian who claims to be Christian') after their new Spanish names. This is likely to be the earliest documentary record produced by the Spanish colonial apparatus in which individual Christian converts in the Maya highlands are identified by name and political status. The mention of these early Maya Christians is all the more significant since they were probably the same native elites introduced in court with Maya and Nahua names in AD 1530. This suggests that attempts to introduce religious change in this part of the Maya highlands started between AD 1530 and 1537 (Kramer 1994: 210).

According to the second round of testimonies, the towns that had been burnt in AD 1530 had already been reconstructed and reoccupied by AD 1537, probably due to forced resettlement by the Spanish. This was likely the result of the Huehuetenango encomienda being reinstated to Juan de Espinar in 1531 by the Audiencia (royal tribunal) of Mexico, after it had been temporarily removed and granted to another encomendero (Kramer *et al.* 1991: 276 & 280). These highland towns were finally abandoned *c.* AD 1550, when Spanish missionaries became more systematic in their efforts to convert highland Maya groups, forcing them to relocate to new colonial towns (Lovell 1983) (see Table 1).

Archaeological research at Chiantla Viejo

In 2017, a team of Guatemalan archaeologists under the author's direction conducted archaeological excavations at Chiantla Viejo in order to obtain material evidence of the events and processes described in *Justicia 1031* (Castillo 2020). We hypothesised that if Chiantla Viejo was the site of the Chiantla that was burnt in AD 1530, as described in *Justicia 1031*, we would find traces of destruction by fire and evidence of reconstruction and remodelling from the subsequent reoccupation of the site. Local oral tradition strongly suggests that Chiantla Viejo was indeed the location of the town known in colonial times as Chiantla, and our excavations encountered a layer of burnt lime plaster in several parts of the plaza and the surrounding buildings within the same stratigraphic level across the site. Using this evidence as a chronological marker of the fire of AD 1530, we have been able to track the construction sequence of the site. This sequence reveals that the site was substantially remodelled after the fire, but that both the pre- and post-fire layouts of the site strongly resembled that of the old ceremonial centre of Zaculeu.

The archaeology of Chiantla Viejo tells the story of a small community living in difficult times. Like many other sites in the Maya highlands founded in the context of the aggressive expansion of the K'iche' during the fifteenth century, Chiantla Viejo was built on a hilltop and surrounded by ravines, occupying a clearly defensible location (Figure 2). The architecture of Chiantla Viejo conforms to traditional patterns of late pre-Hispanic highland Maya ceremonial centres, with both civic and ritual buildings surrounding plazas with a number of central altars (Smith 1955: 69–77). The site has suffered extensive damage over several centuries from recurrent flooding of the nearby River Saquichá. It has also been used as a rural cemetery since colonial times, causing significant further disturbance.

Construction history

Careful stratigraphic excavations have allowed us to establish three major stages of building and remodelling at the site (Figure 3). Combining the excavation data with the information provided by the testimonies recorded in *Justicia 1031*, it is possible to outline the following architectural history of Chiantla Viejo.

Stage I: pre-fire

Stage I corresponds to the earliest building episode. Stratigraphically, it is represented by Floor 3, which dates to the pre-fire period. Natural features were used to shape the layout

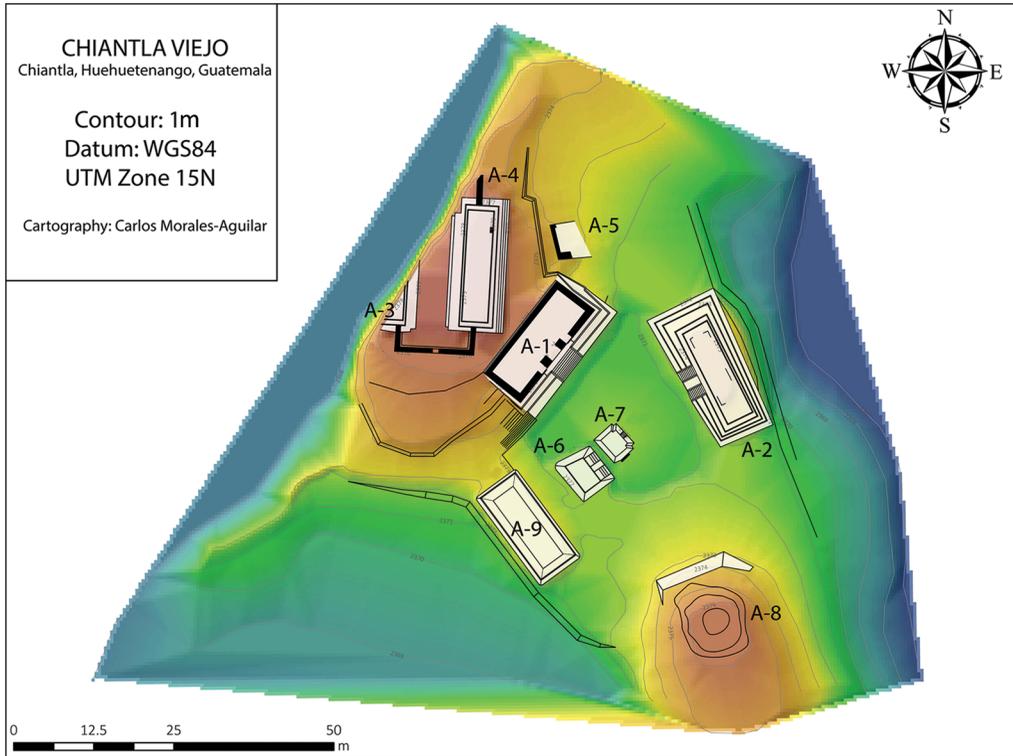


Figure 2. Map of Chiantla Viejo with post-conquest structures, as seen on the surface before excavation (illustration by C. Morales-Aguilar).

of the site: the plaza was built in the lowest part of a natural depression and small knolls to the north and south were used as foundation cores for Structures A-1 and A-8. Combined, this economically created a monumental effect without the necessity of importing large quantities of material (see Figure 2). The soil used as fill in the structures of the main group contained

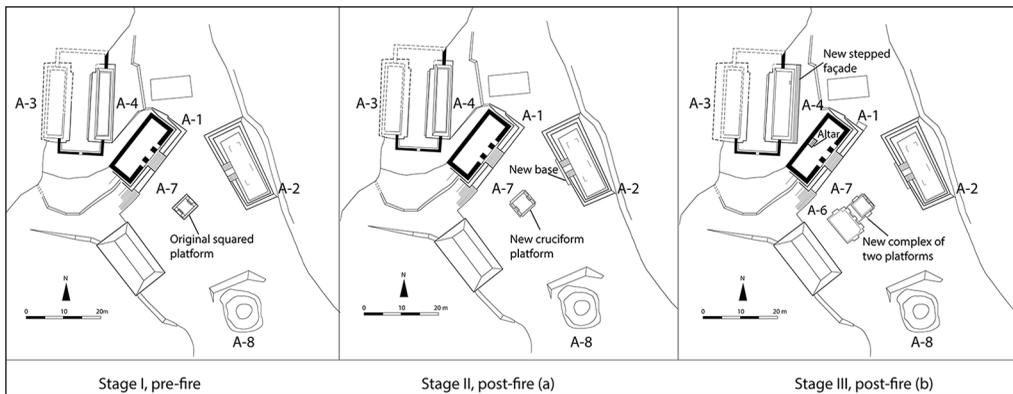


Figure 3. Building stages at Chiantla Viejo (illustration by V. Castillo).

many sherds of pottery dating to the Classic period (AD 500–900). Very few Postclassic-period (AD 900–1525) sherds were incorporated with this earlier, redeposited material. The relative abundance of Classic period sherds and the radiocarbon dates obtained from charcoal samples from the fills (see below) may indicate the presence of a Classic settlement over which Chiantla Viejo was built during the Late Postclassic period. The evidence for a Classic occupation at Chiantla Viejo, however, is currently inconclusive. If there was no Classic settlement, the fill materials must have been brought in from a nearby site of Classic date. At Chiantla Viejo, the style of the architecture on the surface is typical of the Late Postclassic period in the Maya highlands and almost identical to the well-dated Late Postclassic architectural style of Zaculeu, particularly in the use of a thick coat of lime plaster for facing the structures (Woodbury & Trik 1953: 287).

During Stage I, there was only one low platform located in the middle of the plaza. This is significant, as this part of the site would later become the focus of both destruction and reconstruction efforts. The ceremonial centre of Chiantla Viejo was built in the same form as the main plaza at Zaculeu, although more modest in scale and with some specific differences (Figure 4). Similarities include the location of a double-stairway temple in the east (Structure A-2 at Chiantla Viejo, comparable to Structure 1 at Zaculeu) and a terraced platform that supported a building with a single, large room (Structure A-1 at Chiantla Viejo, similar to Structure 6 at Zaculeu). Furthermore, an earthen mound facing the plaza (Structure A-8 at Chiantla Viejo) echoes Structure 9 at Zaculeu. The presence of a mound in the plaza at both Zaculeu and Chiantla Viejo is intriguing. At Zaculeu, the mound made of piled-up soil (Structure 9) on the west side of the main plaza is interpreted as the core of an unfinished structure, work on which was halted during the Spanish invasion (Woodbury & Trik 1953:

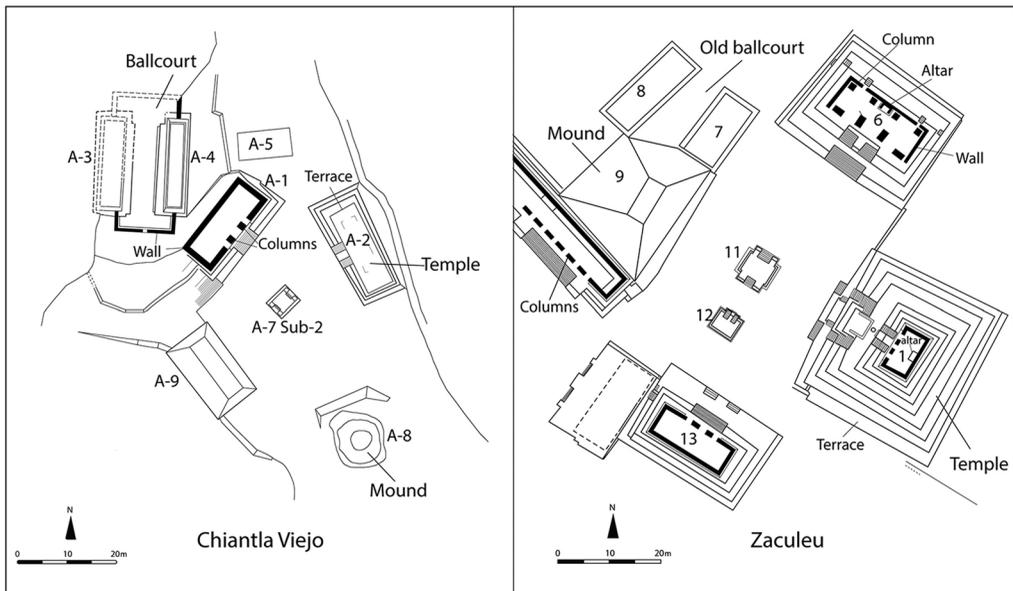


Figure 4. Comparisons between the plaza of Chiantla Viejo during Stage I and the main plaza at Zaculeu (illustration by V. Castillo).

50–52). It seems that a similar form was created at Chiantla Viejo. The ballcourts at Chiantla Viejo and Zaculeu are yet another shared trait: the ballcourt next to Chiantla Viejo's plaza (Structures A-3 and A-4) is paralleled by Structures 7 and 8 at Zaculeu, the latter of which were part of a renovation project on the site of an old ballcourt that was also halted by the Spanish conquest (see Woodbury & Trik 1953: 48–50).

The burning event

Floor 3 shows evidence of burning on the floors of Structure A-1 (in the inner room, on the rear wall and at the base of the stairway), at the base of Structure A-2, and in the area surrounding Structure A-7 Sub-2 in the centre of the plaza (Figure 5). This burning was selective, occurred at discrete locales and targeted specific structures. No evidence of burning was found on the walls of the ballcourt, nor on the floor of Structure A-8. The burning evidenced in Structure A-1 was probably the result of the collapse of a burning roof made of perishable materials onto the inner and outer floor. A convincing indication that the burning of the site targeted specific locales comes from Structure A-2. Traces of burnt stucco were recovered from the lower levels of the structure, along its central axis, whereas there was no layer of burnt plaster recorded in its upper level. Unlike Structure A-1, Structure A-2's upper room was never subsequently re-plastered or renovated after the fire. We surmise that the upper room of Structure A-2 was intentionally spared from destruction, perhaps because it had the function of a pre-Hispanic temple, similar to the eastern structure of the main plaza at Zaculeu. We take this evidence for burning in various areas of the site as clear indications of the fire of AD 1530 mentioned in *Justicia 1031*.

Stage II: post-fire (a)

This stage, represented by Floor 2, constitutes the first remodelling of the site following the burning event. During this stage, Structure A-1, parts of Structure A-2, and the ballcourt were covered with a layer of white plaster. The largest construction effort during this stage focused on the centre of the plaza. Structure A-7 Sub-2, the only low platform in the middle of the plaza during Stage I, was razed with the exception of its base (Figure 6). This probably happened after the burning event, since no evidence of fire was identified in the fill that was exposed when the platform's balustrades were destroyed. On top of the remnants of this structure, a new low platform was built. The latter, labelled Structure A-7 Sub-1, had a radically different plan, with a wider cruciform base and larger balustrades.

Stage III: post-fire (b)

The most ambitious renovations took place during Stage III, which is represented by Floor 1 (Figure 7). In Structure A-1, a low terraced platform, attached to the north wall, was built inside the room along the structure's main axis. This small platform recalls the shape of low, squared platforms in temple rooms at Zaculeu, which have been interpreted as 'altars' (Woodbury & Trik 1953: 31, 34 & 44–45). The redesign of Structure A-1 was probably intended to emulate the architecture of the room in Structure 6 at Zaculeu, located to the north of its plaza, which was a spacious hall with an altar against its north wall (Figure 8).

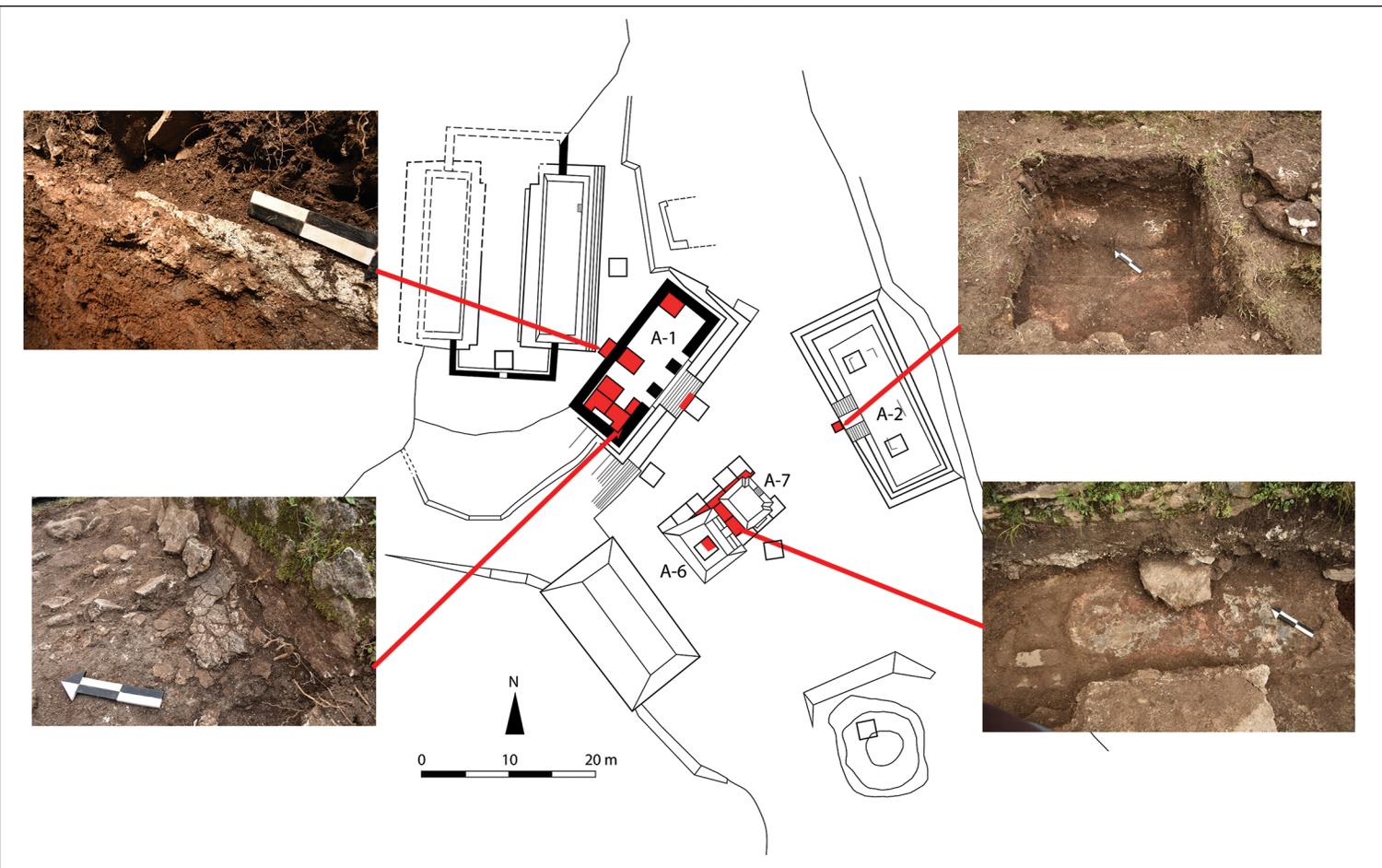


Figure 5. Excavation units, marked in red to show the location of burning. The reddish colour on the plaster indicates burning (photographs by V. Castillo).



Figure 6. Excavation around Structures A-6 and A-7, showing different stages of construction (photograph by V. Castillo).

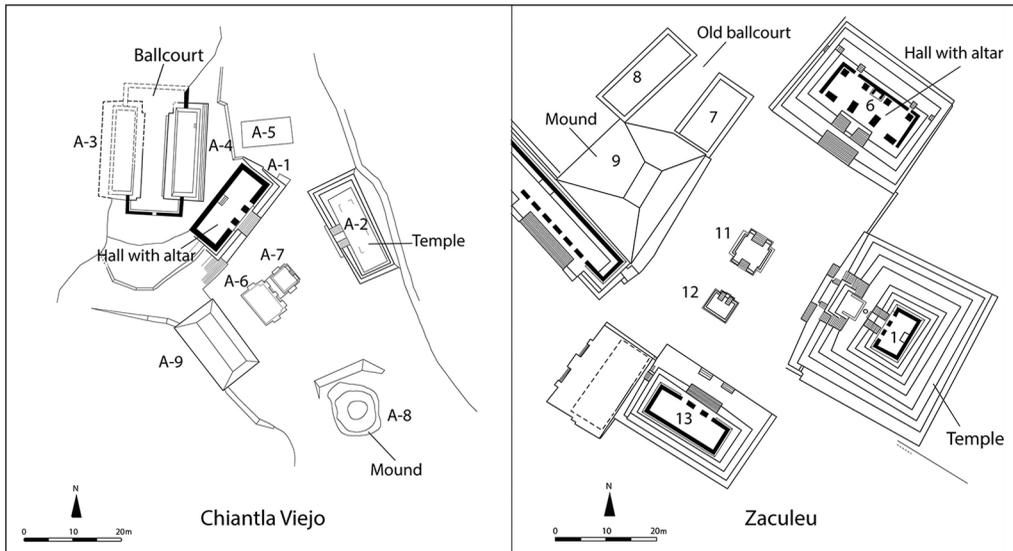


Figure 7. Comparison between the plaza of Chiantla Viejo during Stage III and the main plaza at Zaculeu (illustration by V. Castillo).

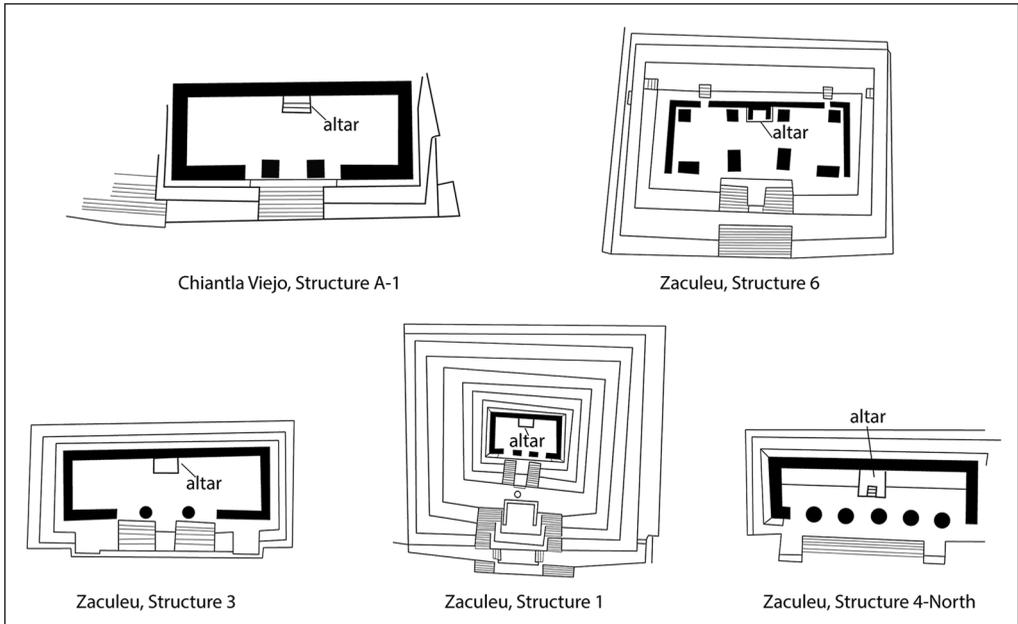


Figure 8. Altars at Chiantla Viejo and Zaculeu; no scale (illustrations from Zaculeu redrawn by V. Castillo after Woodbury & Trik 1953).

In the centre of the plaza at Chiantla Viejo, Structure A-7 (Sub-1) was razed once again, except for its base, which was used as the foundation for the final version of Structure A-7: a low, square platform built at the same time as Structure A-6 to the west. Structures A-7 and A-6 were poorly built. Structure A-7 had structural weaknesses that required two buttresses to be added shortly after construction to brace the north and south walls and prevent the structure's collapse (Figure 9). The construction of the two low platforms in the centre of the plaza was probably an attempt to create a layout resembling that of the main plaza at Zaculeu, where Structures 11 and 12 form a similar arrangement (see Figure 7). Finally, in the ballcourt, a new terraced façade was built on the east side of Structure A-4 Sub-1 (Figure 10).

Before Structure A-6 was built, a series of inauguration rituals related to the orientations of the plaza and its structures were performed. A cut was made in the plaza floor to mark the axial centre of Structure A-6 and a slab was placed in the fill of the structure along its main axis. Perishable material was burnt on this slab before completion of the fill, as indicated by burn marks. This probably happened between AD 1537, the date for which *Justicia 1031* claims that the towns were already reconstructed, and c. AD 1550, when the definitive abandonment of the site occurred. Rituals before and during the construction of Structure A-6, in Stage III, took place when Chiantla Viejo was already under Spanish colonial rule. As these rituals were performed in the plaza in the context of an ambitious remodelling of the site, they must have been public in nature.

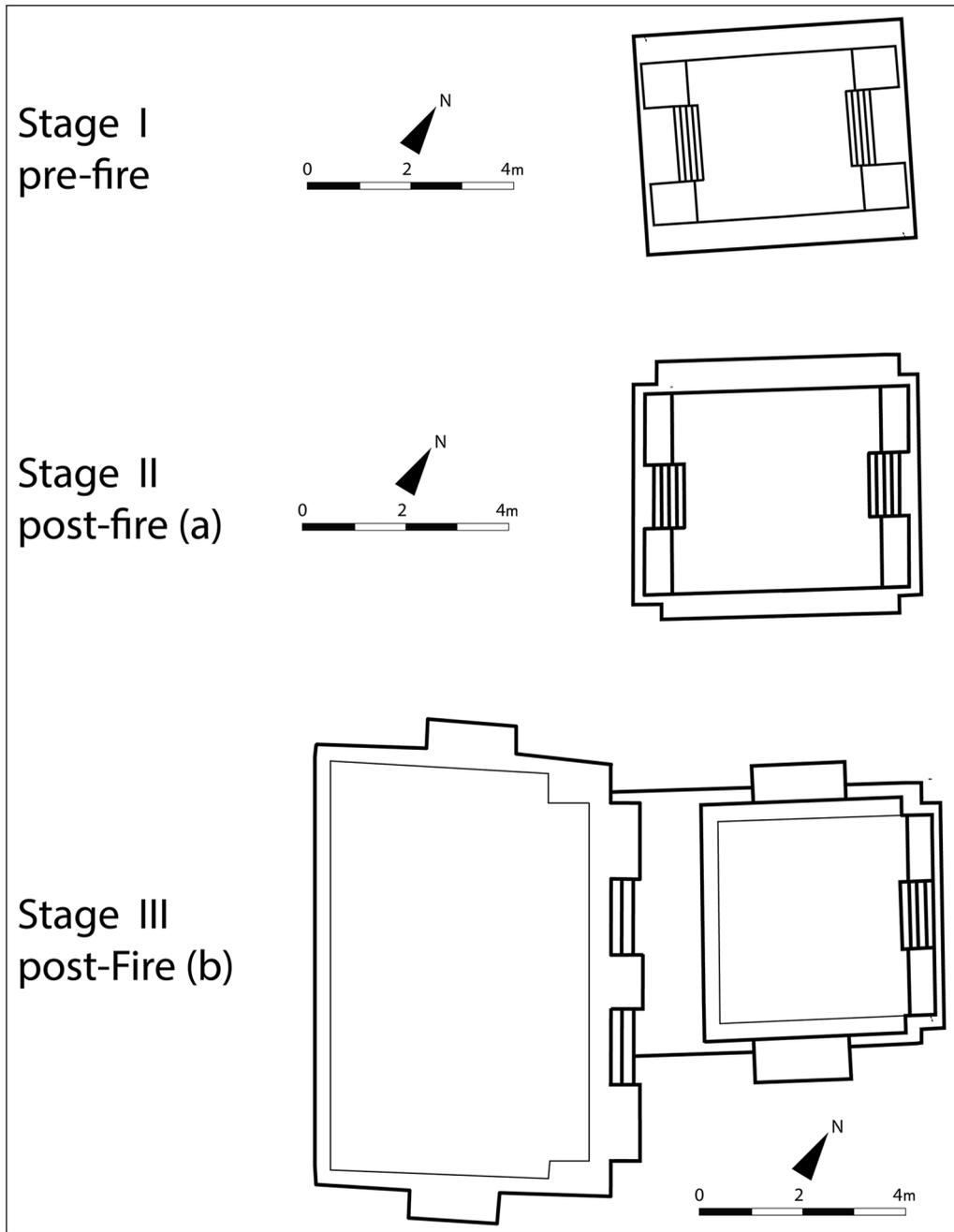


Figure 9. Sequence of construction of the low platforms in the middle of the plaza at Chiantla Viejo (hypothetical reconstruction of Stages I and II; illustration by V. Castillo).



Figure 10. East façade of Structure A-4 at Chiantla Viejo, with the terraced addition of Stage III (photograph by V. Castillo).

Caches and burials

Excavations at Zaculeu have revealed a consistent pattern of cache deposition during the Late Postclassic along the axis of structures (Woodbury & Trik 1953). We therefore expected to find similar deposits during excavations along the axis of buildings in front of the stairways of Structures A-1 and A-2 at Chiantla Viejo; however, no complete cached artefacts were discovered at Chiantla Viejo, from either before or after the burning event. The only cache found at the site comprises a large sherd of unslipped ceramic, which was placed after the burning of the site in an intrusive, unsealed hole at the base of the double stairway of Structure A-2.

Similarly, only a single burial has been documented in Chiantla Viejo's plaza (Burial 1): an intrusive secondary burial north of Structure A-7 that penetrated the surface of Floor 3. The burial contained the disarticulated bones of two individuals, one of whom was represented only by the presence of a cranium, which exhibited evidence for fronto-occipital modification. This pit contained abundant charcoal, probably originating from an unknown area where the human remains had been brought from, as there were no traces of burning in the pit, and pieces of the original stucco of Floor 3 (without evidence of burning) were mixed with small slabs. This suggests that the pit was cut, and its contents inserted, prior to the burning of the site—probably as a ritual during Stage I, before the fire and the first abandonment of Chiantla Viejo. A sample of charcoal from Burial 1 was radiocarbon-dated to 595 ± 37 BP (sample AA-111025; cal AD 1296–1413 at 95% confidence; date modelled in OxCal v4.2 using

Table 2. Radiocarbon dates from Chiantla Viejo. Dates (at 95% confidence) were calibrated in OxCal v4.2 using the IntCal13 calibration curve (Bronk Ramsey 2009; Reimer *et al.* 2013).

Lab no.	Dated material	Provenience	Context	Conventional radiocarbon date (BP)	Calibrated date range (at 95% confidence)
AA111022	Charcoal	104A-1-3-1	Fill of Structure A-1	1549±23	AD 427–564
AA111023	Charcoal	103A-1-3-1	Fill of Structure A-7 Sub-2	1598±19	AD 409–536
AA111024	Charcoal	101A-1-2-4	Fill of plaza	1623±19	AD 386–534
AA111025	Charcoal	101A-2-2-1	Burial 1	595±37	AD 1296–1413
AA111026	Charcoal	101A-7-2-2	Fill of base of Structure A-4	1256±23	AD 694–770
AA111027	Charcoal	103A-3-2-2	Fill of Structure A-6	973±23	AD 1016–1154

the IntCal13 calibration curve; Bronk Ramsey 2009; Reimer *et al.* 2013). Burial 1 recalls the practice of secondary burials, with the remains of two or more individuals, typical of the Late Postclassic period (AD 1250–1525) at Zaculeu (Woodbury & Trik 1953: 80 & 89–111).

Six charcoal samples were collected from the fills of structures and the plaza for radiocarbon dating (Table 2). The resulting dates span the Classic and Postclassic periods. This corresponds to the dating of most of the sherds recovered from the fills of the structures, which belong to the Atzan (late Early Classic, AD 500–600) and Chinaq (Late Classic, AD 600–900) phases at Zaculeu. We should note that the dated charcoal samples are not representative of the three-stage sequence at Chiantla Viejo; it is likely that its builders took material from remnants of probable earlier Classic structures at the site, or from a nearby abandoned or dismantled Classic settlement, to bulk up the structures. While this strengthens the connection of Chiantla Viejo with the region’s past, it does not help date the episodes we identified on site.

Discussion

The original, pre-fire layout of Chiantla Viejo is relevant to the assessment of traditional interpretations regarding the K’iche’ expansion across the Maya highlands in the mid fifteenth century. The layout of Chiantla Viejo in Stage I suggests that the new settlements that were founded as a result of the displacement of populations by the K’iche’ conquest followed established local traditions of public ritual architecture. It appears that the K’iche’ did not direct or influence the construction of these new settlements, as has been previously suggested (Fox 1983: 7–12). Rather, the displaced Mam communities built a new centre at Chiantla Viejo in the image of Zaculeu, their ancestral ceremonial centre. The similarities between Zaculeu and Chiantla Viejo were further emphasised during the first few years of the colonial period, when the Mam were pushed to convert to Christianity. Following the Spanish conquest, the Mam sought to return to Zaculeu and selectively destroyed some of

the main structures at Chiantla Viejo. The site, however, was quickly resettled—likely under Spanish coercion—and there was a significant investment of collective labour in the reconstruction and remodelling of Chiantla Viejo's plaza and its surroundings. The succession of destruction and rebuilding of the low platforms in the middle of the plaza were probably acts of renewal that reinforced the connection of this public space with the layout of the main plaza at Zaculeu.

No pre-Hispanic caches were deposited at Chiantla Viejo. European artefacts and ritual practices were not immediately adopted by the Mam during the early colonial period. A few bones of domesticates of Eurasian origin (*Bos taurus* and *Caprinae*) were found in the topsoil and the upper layers of disturbed fills, but their stratigraphic relationships are unclear (Delsol & Castillo 2021). This pattern differs from lowland sites on the coast of Belize or the central Petén area in Guatemala, where Maya elites quickly adopted and integrated European artefacts in ritual caches (Pugh 2009; Oland 2017; Awe & Helmke 2019). The absence of a mission church or a sixteenth-century Christian cemetery at Chiantla Viejo also demarcates a notable divergence from the early Christianisation process observed at well-excavated sites in the lowlands, such as Tipu in Belize (Graham 2011: 189–283) and Tanchah in Quintana Roo, Mexico (Miller & Farriss 1979). Rather than the conscious acceptance or rejection of Christian influence, this difference probably reflects the unstable political situation in the highland Mam region, which caused the intermittent abandonment and occupation of settlements after the Spanish invasion.

Conclusion

Excavations at Chiantla Viejo, combined with early colonial documentary records, permit the identification of a sequence of building, destruction, reconstruction and remodelling at a highland Maya site caught between the military expansion of the K'iche' and the colonialism of the Spanish conquistadors, including early and active attempts at conversion. The construction and use of traditional Maya architecture for public ritual during early colonial times at Chiantla Viejo does not support the argument that continuity of Maya religion unfolded exclusively in private or clandestine contexts (Farriss 1984: 284). Instead, there was an explicit attempt to reproduce archetypes of public ritual architecture from ancestral pre-Hispanic centres such as Zaculeu at the same time that local elites were negotiating a newly adopted identity as Christian converts. In this, the Mam followed a pre-Hispanic tradition of recentring new settlements during times of great social stress, drawing on spatial arrangements of major ritual centres of the past (Pugh 2003; Milbrath & Peraza Lope 2009; Rice *et al.* 2018). The burning, destruction and abandonment of Maya settlements during the Spanish conquest undoubtedly reflect colonial acts of destruction and domination, but the evidence from Chiantla Viejo indicates that there were also indigenous initiatives to destroy, revive and recreate landscapes and places. This conclusion does not sugar-coat the violence that highland Maya communities experienced during the imposition of colonial rule but, rather, urges us to reconsider the role of indigenous social memory in the acts of destroying, building and rebuilding open public spaces—particularly plazas—as a strategy for survival in the context of colonialism.

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Conquest and revival at Chiantla Viejo

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