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## 2 **LOOKING FOR A NEEDLE IN A HAYSTACK: THE EARLY CLASSIC PERIOD AT ACTUNCAN, CAYO DISTRICT**

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*During the Early Classic period (A.D. 250-500) some ancient Maya rulers firmly established aristocracies and ruled over kingdoms that were sufficiently large and complex enough to qualify as states. But despite its anthropological significance, the Early Classic is one of the least understood archaeological periods in Maya prehistory. What archaeologists know about the Early Classic period is based predominately on excavations at large sites such as Tikal and Holmul. In the Belize valley, so few sites exhibit Early Classic material remains that researchers suggest a severe depopulation of the area and aggregation of the remaining populace into a few centers such as Actuncan. Actuncan is arguably the most architecturally impressive Late Formative (400 B.C. - A.D. 250) center in the upper Belize valley and contains substantial deposits of Early Classic materials. Recent excavations at the site may clarify the organization of a relatively small Early Classic center and the role of pan-Maya styles in a regional ceramic complex.*

### **Introduction**

The Early Classic is that time period between A.D. 250 to 500 when some lowland Maya polities were sufficiently large and complex to qualify as archaic states. During this time, leaders formalized their positions as rulers and reigned over autonomous kingdoms where innovations in monumental architecture, hieroglyphic writing, and decorative arts flourished. How leaders institutionalized their positions as rulers however, is a source of debate.

Despite the anthropological significance of this debate, the Early Classic is one of the least understood archaeological time periods in the Maya lowlands. Currently, much of our understanding of this critical time period is based on the tomb and temple excavations at a few large sites, such as Tikal (Jones 1991; Jones and Satterthwaite 1982), Uaxactun (Ricketson and Ricketson 1937; A.L. Smith 1950), Holmul (Merwin and Vaillant 1932) and Copan (Sharer 2003). From hieroglyphic monuments found in these sites, researchers have reconstructed political histories of a

few Early Classic kings complete with detailed information concerning their marriages and military campaigns. As invaluable as these data are, they present a “top down” view of political relations that took place at a few large centers, rather than an understanding of the developmental processes that lead to the institutionalization of kingship and political hierarchies.

In many areas outside the central Peten or northern Belize, where centers are small and lack extensive documentary information, even less is known about the formation of kingship. Here, so few sites exhibit civic architecture dated to this period that researchers (Awe 1992; Demarest 1992; Ford 1991; Lincoln 1985) suggest a severe depopulation of hinterland areas and aggregation of the remaining populace into a few large sites. Although this is a plausible explanation for the lack of Early Classic site components, it is also possible that we have yet to fully recognize the material indicators of this time period. Archaeologists working outside the central Peten have relied predominately on elite pottery styles, many

of which were first identified at Uaxactun and Holmul, to recognize Early Classic material remains in small centers (Lincoln 1985). These elite types, however, are found in very small frequencies in hinterland sites (Adams 1971; Ball 1977; Gifford 1976; Sabloff 1975). When diagnostic types are found, they generally come from cave and tomb contexts, or possibly civic architecture, but rarely are they found in households. Evidently, archaeologists can identify the Early Classic ritual complex, but have a more difficult time recognizing the domestic assemblage. This pattern has led some researchers (Awe 1992; Demarest 1992; Ford 1991; Lincoln 1985) to suggest that Early Classic assemblages contain mostly long-lived Formative pottery types and regional styles not identified in seminal ceramic reports. If this is indeed the case, our current typological scheme artificially inflates the number of Late Formative sites and falsely exaggerates the decline in Early Classic sites.

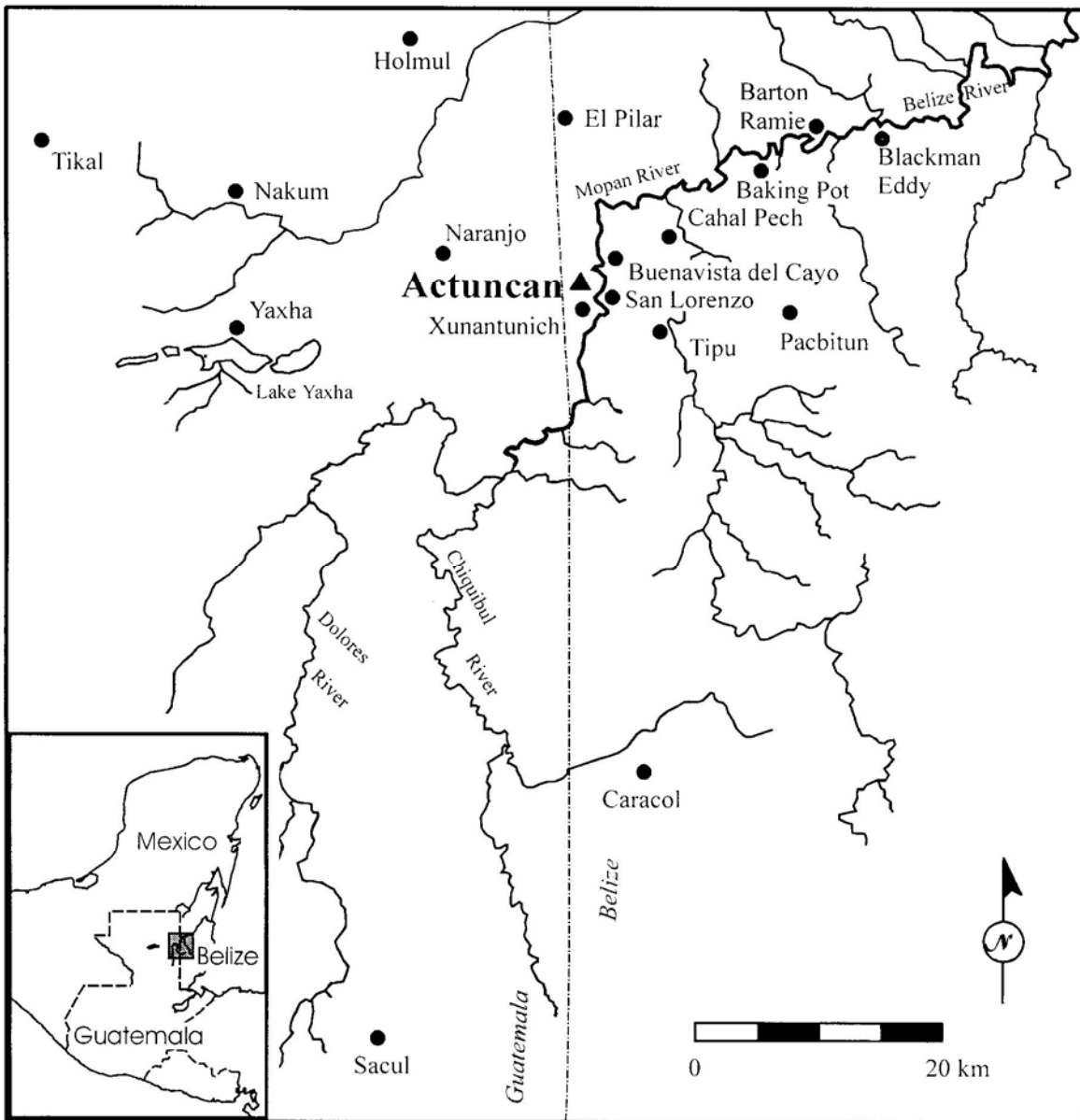
To understand the Early Classic period, archaeologists need to do two tasks. First, we need to develop models for the rise of kingship. Second, we must engage in chronology building in order to test these models. My research at Actuncan seeks to clarify the ceramic sequence in the Belize valley, and address socio-political and economic underpinnings of early kingship in a hinterland polity.

### **Parameters for Understanding the Rise of Kingship**

Many Mayanists favor a model that emphasizes the role of ritual and public display as the initial source of kingly power (Demarest 1992; Freidel 1992; Freidel and Schele 1988). In a recent article, Patricia McNany (2001) elaborates on the importance of cosmology for the institutionalization of kingship in the Maya region, but also considers a set of non-

ideational factors for the rise of the political authority. She proposes a set of seven factors critical to the rise of kingship in the Maya lowlands: 1) hierarchical organization of kin groups, 2) interactive peer-polities, 3) a military tradition, 4) presence of writing, 5) exclusive access to supernaturals, 6) ancestor worship, and 7) wealth accumulation. Although these parameters were originally advanced by K. C. Chang for understanding the rise of Chinese states, McNany applies them to the ancient Maya since these two societies share similar underlying societal structures. At this juncture, I want to stress that this is not a universal explanation for the emergence of rulers. Clearly, the Inka state developed without the use of writing. Nonetheless, these precepts illustrate how control over knowledge, manpower, and wealth could be used to transform an existing ranked organization into a state.

To understand how Early Classic kings institutionalized their authority, archaeologists must investigate the Late Formative period (400 B.C. - A.D. 250), since it is during this time period that leaders began to consolidate their powers. In this paper, I will use the general designation "Late Formative" to refer to that time span which encompasses both the Late and Terminal Formative periods since these underlying conditions were not confined to the Terminal Formative period. Actuncan is an excellent site to view the institutionalization of Maya kingship since it contains both Late Formative and Early Classic deposits. Below, I discuss five out of the seven characteristics with information from the site of Actuncan in the Upper Belize Valley. I will not focus on a military tradition and writing, since I have not found evidence of these characteristics at Actuncan; however, I do think they played a role in the rise of state level society in the area.



**Figure 1.** Sites in the Upper Belize Valley.

**Actuncan**

During the Late Formative periods, a strong and vibrant population occupied the Belize valley, and many people lived in large towns such as Cahal Pech, Blackman Eddy, Pacbitun, Floral Park, and Actuncan (Figure 1). The extensive distribution of Chicanel ceramics, with their typical red to orange

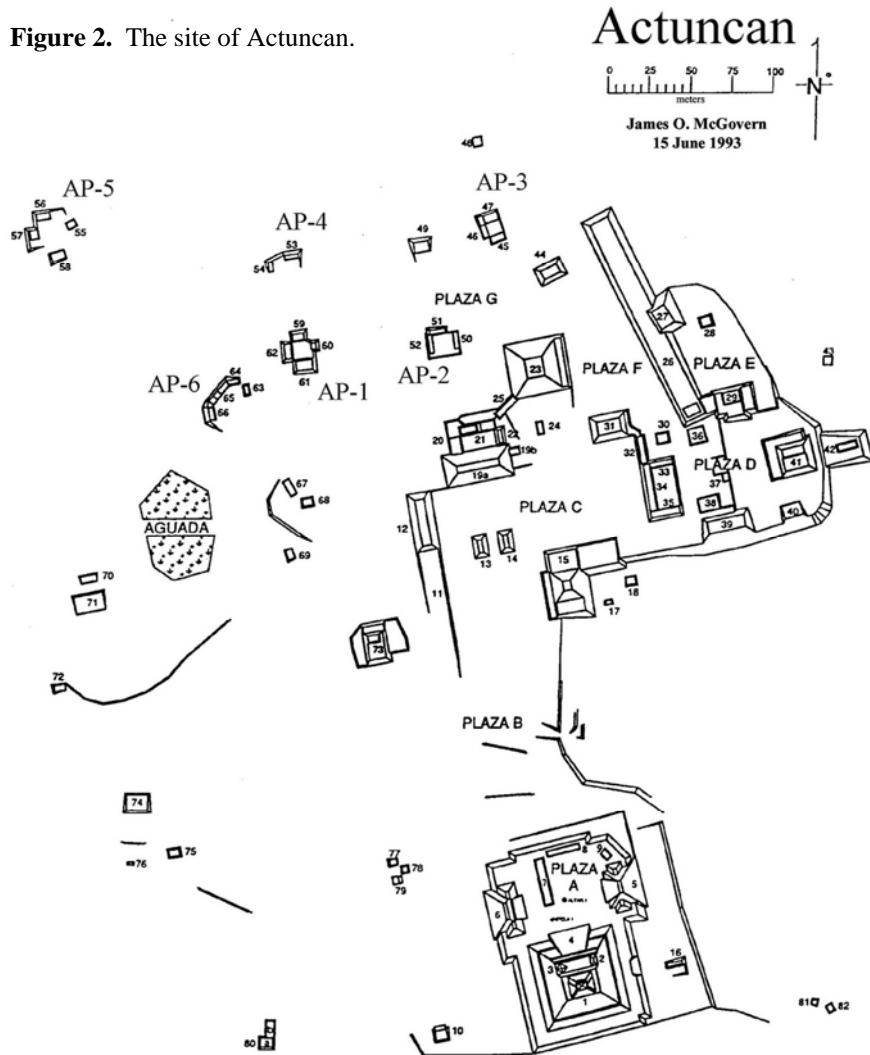
waxy surface treatment, across the lowlands can be used as evidence for extensive interactions between sites. Actuncan is arguably the most architecturally impressive Late Formative site in the upper Belize valley. The center is situated on a long, low ridge overlooking the Mopan river valley and is considered the ancestral shrine of the Late

Classic capital of Xunantunich (Ashmore and Leventhal 1993). Excavations at the site by James McGovern (1992, 1993, 1994) greatly expanded our knowledge of this important site.

McGovern documented two main zones of architecture (Figure 2). Actuncan South is dominated by a Formative triadic temple complex. The complex rests on a person-made platform that is 72 by 120 m in size, and the primary pyramid rises 32 m above the surrounding terrain. Most of this platform and temple complex was built from

the Middle to Late Formative, but modifications to the structures were made throughout the Classic period. The Formative center was connected to the northern portion of the site by a wide causeway that opens into Plaza C. This area contains a ball court, range structures, and pyramids. To the east are smaller plazas defined by civic buildings and possibly elite residential compounds. House mounds are located to the extreme north and west of the civic center, three of which I tested in 2001.

Figure 2. The site of Actuncan.



McGovern placed 44 test pits into eight civic structures in Actuncan North and examined extensive looters trenches in the southern pyramidal complex. Using construction volumetrics, he determined that one-half of the northern civic architecture was built during the Late Formative, and one-quarter was built during the Early Classic (McGovern, personal communication 2003). Although none of the eight civic structures tested by McGovern appear to have been built entirely in the Early Classic, four out of eight structures were substantially modified during this time and the other four were built on Early Classic surfaces or middens. Based on this sample, I can safely say that Actuncan was a burgeoning center during the Early Classic period. Although the site was occupied in the Late Classic, very little (about 15%) civic construction occurred during this time, when presumably labor was devoted to the construction of Xunantunich, about 2 km to the south of the site.

#### *Hierarchical Kin Groups*

Archaeologists reconstruct social rank based on differences in the dimensions of house mounds. My sample size is too small to understand the range of house mound sizes at Actuncan, but it is apparent that some commoner households were large and long-lived by the Late Formative. *Plazuela* 1 (AP-1) is a multi-mound group with four platforms, one on each side of a central patio. It measures 26.5 m north/south and 25.5 m east/west, and has a maximum height above ground surface of 2.5 m, making it the largest *plazuela* on the ridge top. Two out of the three plaza floors date to the Late Formative, and one to the Late Classic. In the two smaller *plazuelas* (AP-2 and AP-3), basal occupation layers contain Early Classic materials, but not substantial architecture. Only at the largest *plazuela* is there evidence of a deeply stratified sequence.

These data may support the current idea that the Belize valley experienced a population decline during the Early Classic. No domestic middens or architecture were found that date to this time span, and even in the largest and most long-lived household there appears to have been a serious disruption in the plaza building sequence. The number of people who resided at the Early Classic site may have been fairly small, even though there were significant civic building projects occurring at this time. Fred Valdez suggests that populations who built Early Classic civic architecture might have lived in dispersed farmsteads, yet to be detected by archaeologists. But it could also be argued that the vast majority of Early Classic domestic structures at Actuncan have yet to be found or recognized as such since houses might have been made of perishable materials and their residents may not have owned fancy pottery.

#### *Ancestor Worship*

McAnany (2001:132) suggests that the Formative period Maya were organized into what Levi-Strauss called “houses” whose members worshiped their apical ancestors. From ethnographic research on ancestor veneration among modern Africa, Asia and Mayan groups, it is clear that only specific individuals become ancestors, most likely the founder of the lineage. Therefore, when archaeologists find burials of single adult males richly adorned in tombs below house floors, they assume these individuals were founders or important lineal descendants of the house. Since the body or relic represents lineage ancestry, ancestor worship serves to entrench the principles of authority and rights to lineage property.

The largest household at Actuncan, AP-1, contains two burial crypts cut into the Terminal Formative period floor. The crypts’ capstones were not plastered over indicating that the contents could be exposed for

ancestor rituals during the Early Classic period. I excavated only the southern most crypt, in which I found a single adult laying face down with its head to the south. A small brown ware effigy vessel in the shape of a bird rested “mouth-up” on top of the individual’s toes (Figure 3). Similar plain effigy covers have been found at Holmul (Merwin and Vaillant 1932:plates 26a and 27 a-c), Uaxactun (Smith 1955: Figure 29d-I), and Tikal (Culbert 1993: Figure 16c), where they were associated with the initial phases of the Early Classic period.



**Figure 3.** Brown ware effigy lid.

#### *Exclusive Access to Supernaturals*

Freidel and Schele (1988) reconstruct early kingship as a shamanistic position. By performing sacred ceremonies of renewal and

fertility, the shaman transformed his or her religious role within the community to one that included political influence. The position became synonymous with the concept of *ajaw*, a sacred ruler endowed with supernatural powers and the ability to communicate with divine ancestors. Awe-inspiring rituals convinced less privileged households and small communities to pledge loyalty and labor to the *ajaw*. During the Early Classic period, Maya kingship was transformed into a stable political institution by the adoption of genealogical principles of succession and the standardization of ritual practices. This shift marks a fundamental change in the ideological underpinning of power from corporate to exclusive authority.

Much evidence has been marshalled to support this model. At Cerros, Freidel and Schele (1988; also Schele and Freidel 1990) suggests that a Late Formative pyramid decorated with stucco panels along the terrace façade depicts celestial agents. The structure acted as a stage where the shaman leader placed himself in a mediating position between the community and the four cycling cosmological powers which ensured agricultural fertility and the continuation of the cosmos. Early stelae also depict rulers as manipulators of the supernatural. For instance the Hauberg stela dated to A.D. 199 illustrates a king with the supernaturals he has materialized by shedding blood. During the Late Classic period, pyramids lacked stucco masks portraying supernaturals, and functioned predominately as funerary shrines for rulers. Late Classic stelae focus on the deeds of kings and queens, their royal parentage, and historical events (Marcus 1992). Classic period religious and political power; therefore, focused on the exclusive power and privilege of rulership.

At Actuncan, Stela 1 was erected in front of the largest structure in Plaza A sometime between 400 BC and AD 100. Nikolai Grube (Grube and McGovern 1995)

interprets the carved image as representing a dancing individual who holds a feathered staff, probably in connection with autosacrifice. In the Early Classic, modification to the terraced and sloped façade included the addition of painted stucco masks similar in style to those found at the royal acropolis at Tikal. These monuments mirror the shifting focus of ritual described by Friedel and Schele.

### *Wealth Accumulation*

My interest in portable wealth items focuses on their role as exchange items for funding political ambitions. Leaders must reward loyal followers, support appointees, and fund projects using some type of staple or wealth finance (D'Altroy and Earle 1985). Staple finance generally involves tribute payments in kind to the central authority in the form of subsistence goods. Wealth finance involves the manufacture and procurement of special products that are used as a means of payment. Control over staple or wealth items was a prerequisite for funding political projects and personnel.

This discussion brings us back to the question of Early Classic pottery. Why is it so rare in small domestic structures? What can be suggested from the work at Actuncan is that Early Classic household assemblages look different than those found in civic contexts. I proposed that the production and distribution of polychrome painted or elaborately carved Early Classic vessels were tightly controlled by elites. Unlike the vast majority of Late Classic polychrome pottery, decorated Early Classic vessels may have functioned as true status symbols displaying information critical to political position. As inalienable wealth, basal flange bowls and tripod vases may have played an important role in the accession to leadership, and therefore, these items were buried with their owners. Here, Friedel and Schele's model appears to fit the data. Early Classic elites

may have controlled ritual paraphernalia critical for performing ceremonies that legitimized their positions as kings. However, if Early Classic diagnostics can be found in commoner contexts, then archaeologists must consider the role these vessels played in lineage life-cycle rituals.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Up to this point, I have focused on some of the pre-existing practices that made the rise of Maya kingship possible. But how did leaders use these practices as resources to institutionalize the position of kingship and transform relatively small chiefdom-level societies into larger states? I view this transformation as essentially a political process, but not one in which leaders tightly controlled all aspect of society. Rather, I propose that the institutionalization of the office of kingship required leaders to delegate decisions and authority in order to expand power. If hierarchy is the key characteristic of state-level societies (Marcus and Feinman 1998), then one of the important differences between chiefdoms and states is the creation of new positions within a growing government. People who filled these offices would have had some modicum of power. At Actuncan, where should I look for evidence of newly created hierarchies? Identifying Early Classic civic architecture, such as a royal residence or a standard two-room temple, is important since these structures represent the office of kings and priests.

But households should also hold a key to understanding the institutionalization of kingship. According to Marcus (1998), part of the process by which emerging Maya rulers institutionalized their elevated positions involved serving the bonds of kinship that had once linked leaders to community members. This process resulted in a two class-endogamous society and a well-developed ideology of stratification in which upper-stratum nobles claimed separate

descent from lower-stratum commoners. Many large households, especially those associated with founding families, therefore had the most to lose in the political and social transformations associated with kingship. If kings attempted to instigate strategies that effectively excluded kin-based leaders from overarching control of social interactions, economic resources, and political appointments, then founding families might have lost long-term control over labor, land, and wealth. In other words, their influence contracted rather than expanded. On the other hand, newly founded Early Classic households might have gained status and wealth as emerging officer holders and supporters of the state. If this is the case, then Early Classic households that appear larger than expected given normal developmental cycles may have benefited from recently acquired wealth and status gained as favors from the king for their loyal support in the face of kin-based authority. To conclude, the difference between leaders and rulers might hinge upon their ability to delegate power and privilege to non-kin officers. The archaeological evidence for these processes will be written not in the concentration of power in older institutions, but in the promotion and proliferation of new titles, new offices, and new wealth.

In conclusion, Actuncan is an excellent location to study the institutionalization of kingship since its occupation spans the Late Formative and Early Classic periods, when the processes that led to the institutionalization of kingship and the creation of a hierarchy of political offices likely occurred in the Upper Belize Valley. My preliminary investigations confirm that the Early Classic period was indeed a time of significant shifts in settlement, but more research is required to better understand the nature of socio-political organization at the site and the extent to which early leaders controlled access to

economic resources such as agricultural and craft products.

Future fieldwork at Actuncan has three objectives: 1) to determine the distribution of staple versus wealth goods by excavating elite and commoner contexts, 2) to reconstruct the layout of the Early Classic center by testing civic architecture, and 3) to clarify the chronology by collecting radiocarbon and pottery samples from stratified deposits. Determining the distribution of domestic goods, agricultural products and exotic items across house mounds allows archaeologists to infer how tightly elites regulated production and consumption of goods in the Early Classic period. Reconstructing the layout of the civic center in terms of the kinds of civic buildings occupied during this period is an index for the size and complexity of the political hierarchy. Clarifying the chronology will help archaeologists understand how rapidly Maya leaders consolidated their power.

*Acknowledgements.* Funding was provided by the H. John Heinz III Fund Grant Program for Latin American Archaeology and the University of Alabama Research Advisory Committee Grant. Investigations were permitted by the Belize Department of Archaeology, and I thank Commissioners George Thompson, Jaime Awe, Allan Moore, John Morris, and Brian Woodye for their support of my research. I particularly want to thank Jaime Awe, Richard Leventhal and Wendy Ashmore for their encouragement and help in securing my permit, and to Jason Yaeger, who offered good advice on excavation strategy. Jim Govern kindly provided field notes, slides, and maps of his previous excavations at the site.

The Galvez family kindly allowed excavations on their land, and I appreciate Mr. Ramon Galvez's patience for any inconveniences that our work might have caused him. Chena Galvez's hospitality and



excellent food deserves special praise. We were assisted in our research by many dedicated Succotzeños including Luis and Edwin Camal, Habimael Chan, Yolanda Chi Camal, Luby Morales, Sellena Camal, Mirla Chan, Alma Coc, and Norma Camal. Last, but not least, many thanks are due to John and Judy Yaeger and Florentino Peñados, who provided more than just food and shelter, but truly a home away from home.

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