El Aguacaté, Belize, Structure A4: The Seat of Intrigue

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EL AGUACATÉ, BELIZE, STRUCTURE A4:

THE SEAT OF INTRIGUE

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ABSTRACT

The University of California, Los Angeles Maya Archaeological Project (UMAP) conducted excavations at the small Maya center of El Aguacaté, Belize in the summers of 2009 and 2010. During these excavations, Operation 4, Sub-Operation A discovered a small structure (Structure A4) just off and behind the main plaza of the site. As part of this field project, my excavations inside Structure A4 encountered a large (4mx1.6m) masonry bench. This bench conformed to what in the literature was defined as a “throne.” With further research and when compared with benches excavated in Guatemala, El Salvador and Belize, it became clear that the bench inside Structure A4 did not merit the title of “throne” due to its deficiency in theatricality: something I have proposed as quintessential to the definition of a throne.
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INTRODUCTION

The Problem: Is it a bench or a throne?

As with all scientific endeavors, archaeology relies on the word of others to provide answers, or at least commentary, on problems we face in the field. Thus, as a novice archaeologist, I too turned to the research of others in hopes of identifying what my field excavations at the Maya site of El Aguacaté, Cayo District, Belize had revealed.

As part of the University of California, Los Angeles Maya Archaeological Project in 2009 and 2010, under the direction of Drs. Samuel Connell and John Morris, I excavated a bench in Structure A4. But this bench appeared different from any I had seen during my visits to other Maya sites in Belize even though El Aguacaté has monumental architecture that surrounds a large plaza. To whit: (1) Structure A4 is small and although it is part of the architecture that defines Plaza A, its doorway and stairs face away from the Plaza. (2) The bench is large with imposing armrests. (3) Excavations revealed very few artifacts within the room containing the bench- in spite of the fact that the room appeared to have been deliberately filled before abandonment.

To make sense of these apparent abnormalities, I turned to the research Peter Harrison had done to identify the function of various benches at Tikal, Guatemala. His work set to define a number of characteristics by which to identify a bench as a “throne” (Harrison 1970, 2001). Analysis done by Sandra Noble (1999), criticized Harrison for not applying his criteria to all of the benches in his study.

So, I was left wondering, “is the feature within Structure A4 a bench or a throne?” To investigate this conundrum, I examined architectural benches, of six Classic Period Maya sites.
Two of the sites were chosen to establish parameters for bench function. First, the raised platform in Structure 1 at Cerén, El Salvador which served as a domestic bench and second, the carved, hieroglyphic-covered throne in Structure J-6 at Piedras Negras, Guatemala. The remaining four were chosen from sites within the Belize River Valley and based on Harrison’s criteria but also resemblance to the bench in Structure A4.

Organization of this Thesis

This thesis aims to amply support the decision to not call the bench inside Structure A4 a throne. Section two, gives a brief synopsis of the Belize River Valley and archaeological research performed to date. This introduces the site of El Aguacaté; how it became an archaeological dig site and a description of the site core layout. After this I move to place Structure A4 in context with the rest of the A-Group by summarizing various excavations done there in. Section three, describes the excavations at Structure A4, finishing with an introduction to the bench found inside the structure. Section four, provides a review of the literature on benches bringing attention to the controversies found within. The problem I aim to address stems directly from these controversies. I end the section with the set up for my comparison research. Section five, begins with the parameters of function for benches in the Maya area and moves to compare four structures and their benches from the Belize River Valley. Section six, provides a discussion on the comparable traits between the four structures and Structure A4 at El Aguacaté. This section is aimed to test the structures against the literatures guidelines for labeling a bench a throne. Section seven, uses these discussions as means to address Structure A4 as not being a throne. This section also moves on to provide instances that could change the ideas set forth in this thesis and provide future research ideas.
THE BELIZE RIVER VALLEY AND ITS ARCHAEOLOGY

The Maya and the Belize River Valley

Archaeologists divide the Maya area into three sub-regions (Figure 1): the Highlands refers to the mountainous region of Guatemala, the Northern Maya Lowlands to the Yucatan Peninsula and the Southern Maya Lowlands to “Belize, the Petén district of Guatemala, and parts of adjacent Chiapas, Mexico, as well as the lowland area of Guatemala along the Motagua River and adjoining lowland Honduras” (McKillop 2004:29). This study will focus on the site of El Aguacaté, located in the Belize River Valley, in the Cayo District of Belize.

The Belize River Valley is one of the most important archaeological zones in Belize (Figure 2). It is usually divided into two sections, the “upper” Belize River Valley and the “central” Belize River Valley. The upper valley corresponds to the area west of the Belize River along the Mopan River tributaries, while the central valley refers to the areas east of that convergence. “Ancient Maya settlement in central-western Belize was conditioned by the Belize River and surrounding terrain” (Chase and Garber 2004:3). The lower (eastern) end of the Belize River is surrounded by savannah and swamp that was not favorable for Maya settlements. The central and western areas of the river allowed for productive agriculture areas along the bank of the river due to alluvial soils carried by flood waters during the rainy season (Chase and Garber 2004:3). Most of the archaeological sites known today are found between the Belize River and the Maya Mountains to the south. Little archaeological reconnaissance has been done on the north side of the Belize River due to the extensive land use by contemporary agriculturalist (Chase and Garber 2004:3).

Temperatures and precipitation in the Belize River area, in both ancient and modern
times, allow for productive agricultural practices (Rice 1974:7,17). Today, secondary-growth rainforests flourish in the land not being used for farming. These forests are made up of a variety of palms and broad-leafed trees, including mahogany and tropical cedar. Faunal residents include howler monkeys, spider monkeys, peccary, tapir, deer, 39 varieties of snakes, and innumerable species of insects (Rice 1974:17-18).

Human occupation in Belize began at pre-ceramic sites along the Caribbean coast sometime around 9000 B.C. (Hammond 1982:354-361). Large Maya cities were constructed in Belize during the Pre-Classic, Classic and Post Classic Periods. Archaeologists have also identified numerous small and medium sized regional centers and house mound settlements throughout the country dating within the same time span (Iannone and Connell 2003:v-6).

Summary of Archaeological Research

Archaeological study in Belize began in October 1839 when John L. Stephens and Frederick Catherwood set out from Belize City in search of the lost cities and art of Central America’s ancient peoples (Rice 1974:1). Thomas Gann, with the support of the British Museum, began the first “serious study” of Maya settlement in Belize in 1890 (Rice 1974:2) and continued his studies in the region through the 1920s at Lubantuun and Pusilha in Southern Belize (Willey and Bullard 1965:8). Other early archaeologists in the area included Teobert Maler in 1908 and Sylvanus G. Morley in 1915 and 1928 (Rice 1974:2). The 1920s saw a rise in Maya research in Belize and included archaeological investigations by Oliver Ricketson (1931) at Baking Pot in 1924, and J. Eric S. Thompson’s early work at Mountain Cow in 1927 (Willey and Bullard 1965:8).

In 1950, Linton Satterthwaite, of the University of Pennsylvania, visited Caracol for three weeks during which time he found 32 monuments, two “causeways”, and “five courts with major
ceremonial buildings.” In 1951 and 1953 Satterthwaite returned to Caracol with the goal of recording hieroglyphic texts. During these visits he mapped the central core of the site, photographed monuments and, along with A.H. Anderson (Commissioner of Belizean Archaeology), fully excavated and recorded two tombs (Chase and Chase 1987:1-2).

Gordon R. Willey, possibly the most influential archaeologist to study the Belize Maya, began his settlement survey of the Belize River Valley in 1954. Through 1956 Willey surveyed and excavated the sites of Barton Ramie, Baking Pot, Spanish Lookout and Melhado (Willey and Bullard 1965, Willey 2004:15-24, Chase and Garber 2004:5). Willey continued to have an influence in Belize archaeology until his death in 2002 (Chase and Garber 2004:5).

Since 1988 the Belize Valley Archaeological Reconnaissance Project (BVAR) has carried out major archaeological work in the Belize River Valley. Under the direction of Jaime Awe and the Belize Institute of Archaeology BVAR has focused on excavations at Cahal Pech, Zubin, Caracol Farm, Pacbitun, Pook’s Hill, Barton Ramie and Baking Pot (Helmke 2009). The Xunantunich Archaeological Project also carried out extensive excavations between 1992 and 1997 under the direction of Richard M. Leventhal of the University of California, Los Angeles. Although its primary research centered on the site core of Xunantunich, XAP performed extensive settlement surveys as well as excavations at the outlier sites of Actuncan, Chaa Creek and San Lorenzo (Leventhal 1992, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997).

Beginning with Willey’s settlement survey, archaeological projects in Belize have been “distinct from other long-term research… in that the focus of the majority of the investigation has been on settlement as well as on minor or intermediate sized sites rather than on major centers” (Chase 2004:335). Belize Valley archaeological research has sought to understand the interrelationships between sites, as well as the overarching political structure of the valley.
(Iannone and Connell 2003 and Chase 2004:336). The University of California, Los Angeles Maya Archaeological Project (UMAP), continued this research strategy at the minor center El Aguacaté, located to the north of the Belize River.

*El Aguacaté, Belize a Minor Center*

El Aguacaté is a recently discovered site in the Cayo District of Belize about 20km due north of the modern town of San Ignacio (Figure 2). Lying between Mennonite agricultural fields, El Aguacaté has been kept relatively safe from looters. Between one to three kilometers southeast of the site, down a steep embankment lies El Aguacaté Lagoon, a Mennonite Community Recreation Area that gave rise to the site’s current name.

In 2008, the Mennonite community around Spanish Lookout, seeking to bring tourists to the site and lagoon, contacted the Belize Institute of Archaeology, Director of Research and Education, Dr. John Morris. With the help of Dr. Samuel Connell and Dr. Andrew Kindon and under the aegis of the Cotsen Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), the UCLA Maya Archaeological Project (UMAP) began its first field season in the summer of 2009.

*Site Description.* El Aguacaté (Figure 4) is oriented on an almost perfect magnetic North-South East-West axis atop a man-made raised plaza. The A-Group forms the main plaza, while the B-Group lies off center at the northwestern end of the main plaza. Surveys conducted in 2009 suggest that a *sacbe* (road) forms a ramp up to the plaza level. Structure A1 a long range-structure occupies the eastern edge of the plaza. Structure A2 lies to the south of the proposed *sacbe*. Structure A3, the second largest pyramid structure at the site, occupies the southern end of the plaza area with its stairway facing north into the plaza. Structure A4 and A5 are located to the west and slightly behind Structure A3 and possibly form one L-shaped structure. Structure A6, also believed to be a range-structure, borders the west side of the plaza.
The B-Group pyramid complex rises at the north end of the site just to the northwest of Structure A6. The B-group is a multi-level complex with a stairway leading up to an interior courtyard. It is believed that three small pyramid structures overlook this courtyard on its north end. Other small structures not yet named surround the perimeter of the plaza.

During the 2009 season UMAP accomplished the following goals: (a) a map was produced of the site core, (b) a preliminary settlement survey around the site was begun, (c) Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) was used to survey sub-surface features and (d) test excavations were conducted in the site core. Excavations in the main plaza provided relative dates, based on ceramic assemblage of the site core, between the Classic and Terminal Classic Periods (A.D. 250-900). The 2010 season saw the continuation of settlement survey and test excavations of the site core. Obsidian hydration analysis of various obsidian blades found during excavations around the site supported the ceramic seriation with dates between A.D. 288 and 760 (Carpenter 2010; based on Napa, California correlates).

*El Aguacaté 2009-2010 Field Seasons: Operation Excavation Summaries.*

Although this paper focuses specifically on Structure A4, it is necessary to summarize excavations conducted in the A-Group to establish context (see Figure 4 for map showing operation designation). The operations are reviewed beginning with Operation 2, Sub-Operation A in Structure A6.

*Operation 2, Sub-Operation A: Structure A6 Excavations 2009.* A 4m x 4m unit (Unit 1) was placed on the plaza side (east) of Structure A6. The goal of the operation was to expose part of the central staircase and any artifacts or features associated with it. More specifically, it was hoped the unit would reveal the construction sequence of the plaza abutting the structure and possibly encounter a sub-floor cache (Fries 2009).
Levels 0 through 2 of the excavations exposed the final construction phase of Structure A6 that included the eroded staircase and plaster plaza floor. At this point, Unit 1 was divided into two, Units 1A and 1B by a north to south transect line. In Unit 1A, a trench was created in front of the bottom step in hopes of discovering a cache. Two additional floors were found below the one abutting the bottom step. These floors continued underneath the bottom step of Structure A6 and, therefore, seem associated with earlier construction episodes. Excavations revealed a total of six floors (Fries 2009).

Unit 1B was created so a detailed profile drawing of the excavated floors could be created. But, the positioning of this unit only showed evidence of three floors, one believed to be different than any of the six excavated below the step (Fries 2009).

It is important to mention that multiple rainstorms caused equipment failures that resulted in the flooding of Operation 2 and it is unknown the overall effects this had on the outcome of the excavation (Fries 2009).

Operation 3, Sub-Operation A: Main Plaza Excavations 2009

A 3m x 3m unit (Unit 1) was placed in the main plaza centrally located between Structures A1, A3 and A6 (Figure 4). The goal of the operation was to “find a basic chronology of the site by determining period distinctions based on ceramic chronologies between floors” (Norman et. al. 2009:1). The large 3m x 3m unit was divided into nine 1m x 1m sub-units designated 1A-1I with 1A in the northwest corner of the unit (Figure 5). Excavations began with Level 0 which extended through the humus layer of the unit. At the bottom of Level 1, there was no evidence of a plaster floor only a layer of gravel and larger rocks that indicated the fill level below the final floor, plaster long ago eroded (Norman et. al. 2009)
At this stage in the excavations only the western most units were focused on due to time constraints (units 1A, 1D and 1G). These units were termed the Western Transect (Figure 5). The Western Transect exposed three definite plaster floors with the last found in Level 8 on top of bedrock (Norman et. al. 2009).

The remaining sub-units were excavated to reveal the cultural layers between the floors. Various fill levels as well as ceramic and lithic artifacts were associated with all three floors (Norman et. al. 2009). From the seriation it was determined that El Aguacaté dated between the Late to Terminal Classic period (A.D. 250-900; Morris 2010:personal communication).

Operation 9, Sub-Operation A: Structure A2 Excavations 2010

An axial- trench formed by multiple 1m x 1m units was placed between Structures A2 and A3. This excavation sought to identify the relationship between the two structures. Unit 1 was placed in the northwest corner of Structure A2’s mound and revealed the corner of Structure A2. Though slightly out of alignment the corner was built using cut limestone blocks and covered with an eroded plaster surface (Figure 6). The edge of the corner was then followed down to a poorly preserved plaster floor (Coons et. al. 2010a).

Unit 2 was placed to the west of Unit 1 (going towards Structure A3) and showed that the plaster floor found in Unit 1 continued to create a “second” corner of the structure. It was determined that Structure A2 was a platform with a small stone foundation placed on top creating a terraced effect to the building (Figure 7). This stone foundation would then support a thatched roof. The wall found in Unit 2 was followed down until it met a poorly preserved plaster floor at its base. Unit 3 was then placed to the west of Unit 2, continuing the trench between Structures A2 and A3. The poorly preserved plaster plaza floor was found throughout the unit (Figure 6; Coons et. al. 2010a).
The plaza floor was found again in Units 6 and 8 of the axial trench. Unit 6B was created encompassing Units 6 and 8 and a 1m x 3m area to the south of the trench as to expose more of the plaster floor between Structures A2 and A3 (Figure 7). As the floor was excavated towards the western end of Unit 6B, it became more and more patchy until it eroded completely. Unit 10, a 1m x 1m unit, was opened to see if the floor reappeared farther to the west and closer to Structure A3. It did not (Coons et. al. 2010a).

Operation 9, Sub-Operation B: Structure A2 Excavations 2010

Sub-Operation B was placed on the southern end of Structure A2 on the western side of the structure facing structure A3. Unit 1 a 2m x 2m unit, was excavated through the same thick collapse layer as found in Sub-Operation A. Because the collapse layer was so compact Unit 2, a 1m x 2m unit, was placed directly west of Unit 1 in order to find the floor and move into the collapse instead of on top of it. The floor was found in Unit 2 and followed into the entirety of Unit 1 without finding any architecture. One important feature found on the floor was a burned patch with cobble stone intrusions. This area was excavated further in hopes of finding some sort of cache, but under the floor few artifacts were found and none in a cluster that resembled a cache (Coons et. al. 2010b).

Since architecture had not yet been found, Unit 3 a 1m x 2m unit was created directly east of Unit 1 farther up the mound of Structure A2. The unit was just large enough to catch the wall of Structure A2 and its abutment to the plaster floor found throughout the entire operation (Figure 8). This wall aligned exactly with the corner wall found in Sub-Operation A, evidence for a single building (Coons et. al. 2010b).
Operation 10, Sub-Operation A: Structure A3 Excavations 2010

Operation 10 began excavations on top of Structure A3 inside the apparent inner courtyard boundaries of the pyramid. Sub-Operation A was focused on the northwestern section of this courtyard. Unit 1 measuring 2m x 2m, was placed in the center of an obvious depression in the mounded border of the courtyard. It was hypothesized that this depression signified an entryway into the courtyard on top of Structure A3. Unit 1 was excavated to a collapse layer of cut stone. Due to the randomness of this collapse layer Unit 2 (2m x 2m) was created just to the south of Unit 1 in hopes of finding any associated features with the collapse before removing the layer (Norman 2010).

Unit 2 was excavated down through the same collapse layer as Unit 1. At the bottom of this layer a thick and quite level, plaster floor was discovered. This floor was followed into Unit 1 where the collapse layer there was removed as well. The floor was followed into Unit 1 until a single stair appeared complete with the plaster lip of the floor. On top of the step a plaster floor was also found. In the northern end of Unit 1 two doorjambs were excavated that created an entryway into the courtyard (Figure 9; Norman 2010).

To begin the discernment of construction phases for Structure A3, Unit 2B, a 1m x 1m unit, was placed centrally in front of the step. In the time there was to excavate Unit 2B, three floors were discovered. Two large cut stones were found at the bottom of the final level of 2B excavations (Figure 10; Norman 2010).
THE SEAT OF INTRIGUE: EXCAVATIONS AT
STRUCTURE A4, EI AGUACATÉ

Operation 4, Sub-Operation A focused on Structure A4, located directly west and slightly behind the large pyramid, Structure A3. The unexcavated Structure A4 appears to form a L-shaped building abutting the west side of Structure A5 (Figure 4). Structure A4 seemed unusual for several reasons: (a) its form was not replicated on the east side of Structure A3; (b) it appeared to face south, away from the plaza to which all other structures in A-Group faced. This paper will present detailed excavation data from the 2009-2010 excavation seasons at Structure A4.

Unit 1 (2009). Unit 1 was a 2m x 2m pit placed on the southern slope of Structure A4 approximately midway up the mound. Excavations began with 10cm arbitrary levels until a thick, compact collapse layer was reached. This collapse was excavated as a cultural layer. Three cut stones, one on top of the other, were discovered in the north-central end of the unit at the bottom of the collapse layer and on top of a pristine plaster floor. This stone alignment was determined to form an in-situ wall of the structure and likely doorjamb (Gray et. al. 2009).

The floor was followed south and one well-preserved step was uncovered at the north of the unit just south of the entryway to the structure and another crumbling step was found just south and below that. A large, complete chert biface was found on this eroded step (Figure 11). Excavations continued at the southern end of the unit but no plaster floor or even remnants of one was found. It was determined that erosion processes destroyed the floor and Unit 1 was closed (Gray et. al. 2009).
Unit 2 (2009). To follow the architecture found at the north end of Unit 1, Unit 2 (also 2m x 2m) was placed to the north of Unit 1 and at a higher elevation on the mound. Unit 2 revealed that the wall (Wall 1) found in Unit 1 was approximately 1m thick. At this point we knew we were excavating the interior of Structure A4 (Gray et. al. 2009).

Lot 3 (a continuation of Lot 3 in Unit 1) was created so artifacts from the outside of Structure A4 would be collected separately from artifacts from the inside of the structure. Lot 3 was excavated down to the well-preserved plaster floor. On top of the floor and very near the entryway, was discovered a cluster of polychrome pot sherds (Gray et. al. 2009).

Interior excavations continued through a thick layer of collapsed roof and walls. A smooth, well-preserved, plaster floor appeared at the northern end of the unit. Excavations around this floor exposed an interior wall to the structure. This floor was later determined to be the surface of a bench. The side of the bench was followed down to 10cm above the plaster floor found in Lot 3. There were still remnants of plaster on the side of the bench surface and in one area there appeared to be red paint still in tact (Gray et. al. 2009).

As the cultural debris just on top of the plaster floor were excavated, clusters of pot sherds appeared in the northeast and central area of the floor in front of the bench (Figure 12). A portion of these sherds matched sherds found on top of the floor in the doorjamb. These sherds were reconstructed to form a partial polychrome cylindrical vase (Figure 13). Once all the ceramic was removed, Unit 2 was closed (Figure 14). Both Units 1 and 2 were backfilled for preservation purposes at the end of the 2009 season (Gray et. al. 2009).

2010 Season. On return to El Aguacaté in the summer of 2010 it was determined that Operation 4 would be reopened to continue the excavation of Structure A4. The first step of the season was removing the backfill that was placed overtop the previously dug architecture. This
was done so that by the end of the season a large-scale picture, both literally and metaphorically, could be taken of Structure A4.

Unit 3. The 2m x 2m Unit 3 was opened on the east side of Unit 2. The goal was to expose more of the architecture of Structure A4 as well as any remaining cultural debris on the plaster floor. Since, there was known architectural features to follow, the levels of Unit 3 were based on cultural association: the first to 10cm above the bench, the second to 10cm above the floor and finally the third was the 10cm layer of detritus on top of the floor; this ensured careful excavation of in-situ artifacts on the floor (Koenig et. al. 2010).

As excavations commenced large cut stones were found in the middle of the unit surrounded by very fine, white, limestone marl with the color 10YR 7/2. In the collapse two walls were found. One (Wall 2) on the southern portion of the unit was presumed to be the other side of the entry and front wall of Structure A4. The other, Wall 3, was found on the eastern edge of the unit running north to south three quarters along the edge of the unit wall (Figure 15; Koenig et. al. 2010).

Excavations continued and the bench surface was uncovered with the same smooth plaster surface. Also in association with the bench, was an armrest. A group of stones that “lean” against Wall 3 running north to south at the side of the unit. There is a lip of plaster from the bench surface running a few centimeters up this armrest surface (Koenig et. al. 2010).

It also became clear that Wall 3 only ran three quarters the length of the room and did not touch the front wall (Wall 1) to the south. The end of the wall was formed by small cut stones stacked on top of each other and was easily followed down to the plaster floor. Furthermore, this wall jutted out further than the side of the bench by approximately 10cm causing the bench to be slightly inset (Koenig et. al. 2010).
At the final level, 10cm above the plaster floor, three large cut stones leaning against each other forming a tee-pee shape were removed. Underneath these stones the continuation of the pot smashers found in Unit 2 the previous year were found. Two other clusters of pot sherds were found to the east as well (Figure 16; Koenig et. al. 2010).

Upon reaching the floor it was realized that the front wall (Wall 2) did not extend the entire unit as previously thought. A very preserved cut stone was found about halfway along the unit’s south side. This stone was investigated and more cut stones appeared to be stacked on top of it along with the appearance of plaster on the side of one of the stones. It was determined that this was actually the other doorjamb to the structure. The area of dirt was excavated as Lot 1 in two levels one to 10cm above the floor and the second the last 10cm to the floor. In this last level an odd hammer stone, round with a continuous groove around the center, and partial biface was found on top of the floor (Figure 17). At the plaster surface Unit 3 was closed though it was noted that the plaster continued into the eastern unit wall indicating more interior space (Figure 18; Koenig et. al. 2010).

**Unit 4.** Another 2m x 2m unit was placed to the west of Unit 2, and was designated Unit 4. Excavations of this unit had the same goals as Unit 3: to uncover the remaining architecture of Structure A4 as well as any cultural deposits on the floor. Like Unit 3, Unit 4 was also strewn with large cut collapse stones mixed with the very fine limestone marl (10YR 7/2). Unit 4 actually began to replicate Unit 3 in findings. Another wall (Wall 4) was found running north to south but like Wall 2 did not abut the front wall (Wall 1) of the structure (Figure 15). Also, an even more intact armrest was found at the end of the bench and the same slight inset of the bench behind Wall 4 (Koenig et. al. 2010).
Unlike Unit 3, no deposits were found on the floor. There were barely any artifacts throughout the entire excavation. The only one of note was a large rim sherd of an olla. This was found amongst the rubble halfway down in the excavations near the front wall (Figure 19). Two smaller pieces of this same olla were found a little ways underneath. While cleaning the floor for the final photo it was noticed that it continued around the corner (west side) of Wall 4. This gave evidence that the room continued north (Figure 20; Koenig et. al. 2010).

Unit 5. Unit 5 was another 2m x 2m unit placed directly east of Unit 3. The goal of the excavation was to find the extent of the architecture of Structure A4 and investigate a possible physical connection between Structure A3. Like the two units before, Unit 5 was excavated via cultural levels based roughly on the levels of Unit 3 even though the bench was not there as a guiding point. Due to the increased height of the mound in this area instead of three levels there were four (Koenig et. al. 2010).

Unit 5, with exception to the humus layer, Wall 2 and plaster floor, was composed strictly of very compacted cut stone blocks and the fine white marl as mentioned in previous units. The compaction and size of the cut stones seemed to be much greater than the other excavated interior areas. The top of Wall 2 was found close to the top of the excavation in poor condition, but as it was followed downward it became more preserved. The continuation of Wall 2 was also found early on with quite a few areas of plaster still present. A northern wall was not discovered (Koenig et. al. 2010).

The final level of the unit was the last 15cm above the floor surface. Some exciting floor deposits were found in this level. The first, not found directly on the floor but approximately 5cm above it, was an obsidian blade fragment near the southeast corner. Later this obsidian fragment was discerned to be from the Pachuca volcano in Central Mexico near Teotihuacan
On the south-central end of the unit a greenstone (granite) mano fragment was found along with a small cluster of sherds (Figure 22; Koenig et. al. 2010).

With some exploration into the unit wall, the eastern wall (Wall 5) of Structure A4 was found. Due to its importance the 5cm of dirt into the unit wall was excavated and Wall 5 was drawn accordingly on documents. Though we do not see the top of Wall 5, the lower portions show pristine preservation with large patches of plaster still intact. The southeast corner of the connection between Wall 1 and 5 was also found. In this corner on the east side there is evidence of burned plaster. A carbon sample was removed from this area in the hopes of retrieving a radiocarbon date (Koenig et. al. 2010).

With the discovery of Wall 5 the eastern most boundary of Structure A4 was found. From this information it is clear that Wall 2 acts as an interior dividing wall for the structure separating the space directly in front of the bench from the apparent room to the side (Figure 23; Koenig et. al. 2010).

Unit 6. Since there was evidence for the floor continuing out of Unit 4, Unit 6 (2m x 2m) was placed to the north of Unit 4 but only abutting on 1 meter to the east. This orientation allowed for the excavation of a passageway around Wall 4 into the presumed mirror side room as seen in Unit 5 (Figure 24). Like Unit 5, the levels were based on the cultural levels of other units and their associations with surrounding architecture. It is also of note that Unit 6 was placed on the highest point of the mound and excavations here were expected to be much deeper (Koenig et. al. 2010).

The continuation of Wall 4 was found close to the surface. Excavation continued through the same compacted collapse and limestone marl as the rest of the structure. About halfway
down the northern wall (Wall 6) was found. This signified the northern extent of the room itself (Koenig et al. 2010).

At the final level just above the floor there was a slight change in color to the marl. Instead of white, it appeared to be slightly gray in color. We hypothesized that this could be a natural occurrence or that this section of the structure was burned. We assumed that once uncovered, the plaster floor would tell us more. Three clusters of sherds were found directly on top of the plaster floor but there was no indisputable evidence for the room being burned (Figure 25; Koenig et al. 2010).

Unit 7. With the discovery of most of the architectural boundaries of Structure A4 the final goal of the 2010 season was to see the limits of the bench itself. At first the goal was to excavate a large 2mx6m unit to uncover the estimated entirety of the bench and the extent of Wall 6 of the structure. Due to time constraints, Unit 7 was limited to 2m x 2m and was placed just east of Unit 6 and to the north of Units 2 and 3 (Figure 24; Koenig et al. 2010).

The plan for the excavation was to first discover the top of Wall 4 then to excavate to 10cm above the bench surface with the final level unearthed to the surface. The soil on top of the bench and throughout Unit 7 was humus and top soil not the limestone marl seen throughout the rest of the structure. Wall 4 was found early on with evidence of a plaster surface indicating the true top of the wall. This also shows that this wall was not high enough to support a vaulted ceiling over the bench. The plaster on top of Wall 4 continued onto the perfectly sculpted armrest. The only artifacts found on top of the bench were one small sherd and a shell with a drill hole much like a pendant (Figure 26; Koenig et al. 2010).

In the center of the bench surface a round depression was visible. At first it was estimated that this could possibly be evidence for a cache or burial inside the bench but when it
was further examined, no evidence for re-plastering of a hole was found (Figure 27). Overall, the excavation of Unit 7 gave measurements for the size of the bench: 4.30m long (measuring midway up from the floor and Wall 3 inset to Wall 4 inset), 1.60m in width and on average .60m in height (Figure 28-31; Koenig et. al. 2010).

*Key Features from the Operation 4 Excavations.* All the fill recovered from Structure A4 contained a quantity of fine white marl (Figure 30). Additionally, this soil contained very few sherds or other artifacts. These characteristics led project members to hypothesize that Structure A4 was deliberately filled at the time of abandonment. This behavior could account for the major artifacts being found directly on the floor and the preservation of the architecture and original plaster. Furthermore, the artifacts recovered from the structure floor have been hypothesized to represent some type of termination ritual. While there is no way to prove this hypothesis, the recovery of a cylinder vase (see Muros 2010) suggests elite agency.

Additionally, the location and orientation of Structure A4 makes it unusual within A-Group. It is seemingly ‘tucked’ behind Structure A3, visible from the courtyard but not directly tied to the plazuela arrangement. Also, Structure A4 faces away from the courtyard, signaling something private and not to be seen by those in the plaza. But this seclusion is not walled off and therefore it has a feel that one could access it from the public plaza but still would be entering a private space. The area in front of Structure A4 is also very small; the plaza drops steeply away only 5m from the structure’s door. This drop off has not been excavated.

During excavation, we were surprised to discover a large, plaster covered masonry bench inside Structure A4. With its imposing surface size filling the back wall and extending 1.6m into the room, slanted armrests and side-walls the bench seems quite grand, a giant could sit on it and
rest its elbows (Figure 28). The front façade of the bench was built using large cut-stone blocks (Figure 31). To date no excavations have explored the interior of the bench.

The rest of this thesis is dedicated to the research of structures from Belize in the Late to Terminal Classic period, and their incorporation of benches. What these benches may or may not tell us about structure functions.

CONTROVERSIES SURROUNDING THE IDENTIFICATION OF BENCHES IN THE MAYA AREA

There is little in Maya literature dedicated to the discussion of benches. Most authors note them as architectural features inside structures and not as the key determinant of meaning or function of a structure. I believe this lacuna regarding benches derives from two directions.

The first issue is the central, but unspoken acknowledgement, that benches represent multi-use areas. These functions include: sleeping, storage, food preparation, feasting, receiving and administrative areas. The second issue derives from the application of the term “throne.” Benches transform into thrones based on their perceived ornateness or grandeur. Thus, a significant number of benches are ignored, particularly those without obvious residential associations or without obvious elite decorations or context.

Peter Harrison (2001:89) states that for a bench to be a throne it must have three main components: (1) it must be masonry built, (2) it must have side arms (armrests), and (3) a throne must display “other features that allow for royal adornment and the drapery of theatrical presentation.” The one “unifying element” of these thrones is that a person in authority sat on them (Harrison 2001:78). Continuing this line of thought, Valdés (2001:150) includes other
features that transform benches into thrones. “[Thrones were]… built in the first chamber in front of the central access door to the edifice, so that the sovereign seated there could be seen by the spectators gathered in front of the palace while he controlled the assistants to the act.”

Harrison first proposed this definition in his 1970 dissertation, *The Central Acropolis, Tikal, Guatemala: A Preliminary Study of the Functions of its Structural Components During the Late Classic Period*, and these criteria for thrones have been used by many archaeologists to assign a name and role to a specific architectural feature (A. Chase and D. Chase 2001; Iannone 2006:154; Inomata:2001:299; Noble 1999; Valdés 2001; Yaeger 2010:154).

Harrison’s definitions stimulated me to jump up and proclaim that the bench in Structure A4 was the “Throne of El Aguacaté”.

However, in her dissertation, *Maya Seats and Maya Seats-of-Authority*, Sandra Noble (1999) points out a key contradiction in Harrison’s argument:

Harrison suggested that one seat in Tikal’s Structure 5D-46, which he considered to be a royal residence, would qualify as a throne. Indeed its placement in the central room of the east façade, at the centre of the back wall, with bolsters [armrests] on each side enhancing both its complexity and its symmetry, do reveal its hierarchical privilege… But Harrison also found five other identical seats in the Central Acropolis…Yet his reconstruction of different functions for these structures precluded calling them all “thrones”. (Noble 1999: 69)

As recognized by Noble, Harrison had set forth specific guidelines to determine whether certain structures at Tikal held thrones while managing to disregard a number of other architectural features that conformed to the same guidelines.
“What to do?” I had thought it was a throne inside Structure A4 at El Aguacaté, but now I was uncertain about applying this attribution to the bench. I decided to compare the bench at El Aguacaté with other examples from the Classic to Terminal Classic Maya corpus. I would begin by looking at Cerén, El Salvador, for an example of the quintessential “household bench” and at an elaborately carved, unquestionable “throne” from Piedras Negras, Guatemala, to define the parameters of the bench vs. throne controversy. Then, I would examine comparable benches from four sites in the Belize River Valley– I would see what these other sites had to tell me about the feature inside Structure A4.

COMPARABLE BENCHES AND THEIR STRUCTURES

The Boundaries

Cerén, El Salvador: The Household bench. Cerén is located in El Salvador at the northern end of the Zapotitán Valley (Figure 1) in what is referred to as the Southeastern Maya Periphery (Sheets 2002:1-3). Cerén was chosen as a comparison site because there is no argument for the context of structure use at the site. The Loma Caldera eruption around A.D. 600 covered this small village in ash leaving pristine preservation throughout the site (Sheets 2002: 4). Termed the “Pompeii of the New World”, Cerén provides many scholars with important information about how small farming communities were organized.

Structure 1. Structure 1 is located in the domain of Household 1 at Cerén (Figure 32). Household 1 is made up of “four functionally distinct structures that appear to have related to each other on the basis of proximity, complementary functions, contiguous extramural work areas and interjoined traffic patterns” (Beaudry-Corbett et. al. 2002:45). Structure 1 (Figure 33)
is designated the *Domicile*, or the place of residence. Structure 1 was built on top of an earthen platform supported by four corner columns and wattle-and-daub construction. There is an interior room, as well as what is best described as a roofed porch. The interior room holds a raised bench (Beaudry-Corbett et. al. 2002:45-48).

…the elevated solid adobe bench…probably was used by the family as a bed at night, by unrolling mats to make it comfortable. During the daytime the mats were rolled up and stuck up in the rafters, and the bench probably was where the family ate and engaged in other familial activities. (Sheets 1992:45)

Artifacts were evidently confined to the interior room except for a storage vessel, spindle whorl, miniature pot and a small grouping of bone on the porch (Figure 33). On top of the bench four whole vessels were found, two containing beans and two larger ones empty. Besides these, there was a large sherd cluster that can be divided into two separate vessels. These vessels evidently fell from the roof during the eruption. On the floor at the southwest end of the room, two large storage vessels were found, one containing cotton seeds, as well as a polychrome tetrapod containing hackberry pits, two red-painted jars and a ladle-handled censer were found (Figure 33; Beaudry-Corbett et. al. 2002: 48-49).

*Piedras Negras: The Throne.* Piedras Negras is located in the northwestern Petén region in modern day Guatemala. Piedras Negras is a large site stretching nearly twelve kilometers along the eastern bank of the Usumacinta River (Figure 34). The West Group forms the center of the site and includes its acropolis on its northwestern edge. The acropolis rises from the plaza floor via a monumental stairway. Directly at the top is Structure J-2 and across the inner courtyard stands Structure J-6 (Satterthwaite 2005a:12-13, 24-27). It is inside J-6 that an indisputable throne was discovered
Royal Throne 1. Throne 1 is set into a niche at the back wall of Room 1 in Structure J-6. It is centered between five doorways leading out into the inner courtyard (Figure 35). Furthermore, these doorways were then centered with those of Structure J-2 overlooking the public plaza area below. Inside the niche, a masonry bench was built to support a large stone slab. This allowed for the throne surface to be all one level. At the front two legs then supported the stone slab. A carved screen or backrest was placed at the back of the niche to complete the throne effect (Figure 36). The front face of the stone slab had a single row of hieroglyphs carved into it. The legs also had carved hieroglyphs on their front and sides, 22 glyphs each (Satterthwaite 2005b:68-69). As described by Satterthwaite the back screen was very ornate:

The screen seems to be a large serpent mask, front view, with teeth and mouth curls at either side, two nose plugs in the center, and supraorbital plates above the eyes. If this interpretation is correct, the eyes are formed by two large squarish openings, cut clear through the stone except for the two nearly life-sized human busts set within them. These face the center from either side. (Satterthwaite 2005b:69)

Hieroglyphic and Artistic Evidence. The hieroglyphic text inscribed on Throne 1, as well as the scene depicted on Piedras Negras Panel 3, support the interpretation of the bench in Structure J-6 as a throne. The first sentence of Throne 1 describes the setting or dedication of the “Paw Stone” interpreted by Clancy (2009:151) as the proper name of Throne 1 (Figure 37). The text continues with the “loss of rulership at the Paw Stone” by Ruler 6 (Clancy 2009:152). This phrase suggests that to be a ruler at Piedras Negras involved sitting on the Paw Stone.

Piedras Negras Panel 3 gives us a glimpse of Throne 1 in action (Figure 38). Though not referred to in the text of Panel 3, the ruler holds court while sitting on a throne that both structurally and artistically mimics that of Throne 1. The ruler sits upon a bench that is
supported by two free-standing legs while the screen of the bench rises behind him. The portion of the screen visible shows the same jeweled scrolls that flank the earflares worn by the serpent or witz seen on Throne 1 (Clancy 2009:153).

**Benches in the “Twilight Zone”**

The following four benches derive from sites in the Belize River Valley and do not replicate either of the benches discussed above. Rather, these benches were built in the undiscussed and liminal, “Twilight Zone” of archaeological reports— their function inferred largely from Harrison’s definitions.

**Nohoch Ek, Belize**

Nohoch Ek is a small ceremonial center located northeast of Xunantunich in the Belize River Valley (Figure 3). “The site comprises six main mounds arranged along the edges of a rectangular plaza” (Coe and Coe 1956:370). Excavations in 1949 focused on Mound I located on the eastern end of the plaza (Figure 39) and identified earlier buildings superimposed upon each other (Structures A-D, with Structure D forming the terminal architecture of the mound-Figure 40). In his analysis of the site, Willey (1956:778) was the first to identify Nohoch Ek as a village site inhabited by “semi-sophisticated peasantry.” Driver and Garber (2004:302) view Nohoch Ek as a third-tier, subsidiary site [surrounded by] “fairly dense settlements of successful farmers”.

Relative dates from ceramics in Structure C, Mound I suggests it was built during the Late Classic period (Coe and Coe 1956:377). Structure C is composed of three rooms and faces the plaza. Built first, Room 1 the central and largest room has three doorways leading inside to a long bench that runs about 8.5m in length from the west wall. On either side of Room 1, were added two smaller rooms. Each smaller room has an exterior doorway and a bench that fills the
entire back wall (Figure 41). None of the benches in Structure C had masonry armrests (Coe and Coe 1956).

*San Lorenzo, Belize*

The Xunantunich Archaeology Project (1992-1997) focused on the outlying communities of the area as well as the large, politically-dominant site of Xunantunich. One of these communities was San Lorenzo a small settlement near the Mopan River that consisted of seven patio groups (Figure 42; Yaeger 1995:113). Located only 1.5km southwest of Xunantunich (Yaeger 1995:114), San Lorenzo was used to examine the relationship between regional centers like Xunantunich and its outlying “neighborhoods”. Jason Yeager (1995, 2000) postulated that San Lorenzo was a non-elite Maya community consisting of “related extended families forming a localized lineage group” (Yaeger 1995:115).

Settlement cluster SL-22 was one of the largest at San Lorenzo (Yaeger 1995:20), consisting of five structures surrounding three sides of an open plaza area (Figure 43). Structure 3 is located on the southeast corner of this plaza (Figure 44) and is a “low substructure that rose in two low steps and was capped by a three-room masonry superstructure” (Yaeger 2000:207).

A doorway leads into the largest of the rooms (Room 1), which is divided by two walls to create side rooms on either end of the structure (Room 2 and 3). A C-shaped bench runs the length of the room and extends past the sides of the dividing walls. By stepping onto the bench one can enter Rooms 2 and 3. Armrests were later added along the sidewalls to the bench in Room 1. Rooms 2 and 3 contained cobble-lined pits cut into their floors. In the case of Room 2, this pit was lined with an olla and was possibly used for storage (Yaeger 2000:207-208).
Xunantunich, Belize

The regional capitol of Xunantunich is located on a leveled hilltop on the western bank of the Mopan River a half mile from the Guatemalan border with Belize (Figure 3; MacKie 1985:7-8). Three main plazas surrounded by monumental architecture form the epicenter of Xunantunich (Figure 45). The largest structure at the site, El Castillo, is located at the northernmost end of the site and can be seen from 7-8km to the east. Xunantunich began in A.D. 750, and was occupied for 200 to 250 years.

Not associated with any of the three main plazas, Structure A-15 was built behind Structures A3 and A4 facing away from the epicenter and towards the two causeways that entered the site core (Figure 45). Broad steps from the plaza led to a platform (~2m high) on which the five-roomed Structure A-15 was built. Three doorways led into the three front rooms of the structure. The side rooms (Rooms 1 and 3) include small alcove rooms on their sides. The central room (Room 2) holds passageways to the two rooms located at the back of the building (Rooms 4 and 5; Figure 46). The front facing rooms each hold a large masonry bench equipped with armrests (Room 2’s bench only has one). These benches are all centrally aligned with the assigned doorway so one could see them from the outside (Figure 47; MacKie 1985:53-61).

Excavations revealed that the bench in Room 2 contained a double burial of an adult and child both missing their crania. Each skeleton was associated with simple grave goods: the child with three small jade beads and a fragment of a jade disk; the male with a jade disk and three canine teeth, one determined to be puma (MacKie 1985:75-77).

Yaeger (2010:154-155), using Harrison’s criteria, has argued that the bench in Room 2 is the throne of Xunantunich.
Minanha, Belize

The site of Minanha is located on the northern end of the Vaca Plateau, 25km north of Caracol and 15km south of Xunantunich (Figure 3). It is much like Xunantunich in size and level of social complexity. Likely, Minanha served as a key Late Classic community in the area based on its strategically located at the base of three converging valley passes (Iannone et. al. 2004:155). As noted by Iannone et. al. (2004:155), the site “consists of a royal residential acropolis, and a more publicly oriented series of plazas and courtyards containing the full range of building types found in centers of this size and complexity” (Figure 48.) At its fluorescence, in the Late Classic period, a “full-fledged royal court was established at the site…The royal court, whose presence is exemplified by an elevated, restricted access royal residential courtyard, seems to have prospered for roughly a century, after which the courtyard and its buildings were buried” (Iannone et. al. 2004: 155-156).

Structure 37J, located within Group J, contains a bench similar to that found in Structure A4 at El Aguacaté. In 2002 excavations of the penultimate building phase of Structure 37J uncovered an once vaulted room with a “centrally located masonry bench with side-arms” attached to the room only at its back (Figure 49; Iannone 2006:154). Tiers of secondary benches flanked the central one (termed throne by Iannone) in either side room.

The benches [flanking ones] themselves are not of the traditional “sleeping variety,” and their location to the side of the throne would have meant that they would have also been oddly placed for granting audiences. However, they would have been quite useful for storing ritual paraphernalia and conferring with advisors. (Iannone 2006:154) The focal bench also faces out towards the only doorway into the structure, which then leads out to the inner courtyard of Group J.
Evidence shows that the interior of the room was carefully swept clean without evidence of any termination rituals prior to its intentional burial. This intentional burial began filling the room “almost level to the terminal courtyard surface”. At this point the vaulted ceiling was partially collapsed and the terminal construction phase covered all of Structure 37J (Iannone 2006:154).

DISCUSSION

The study conducted by Harrison (1970) was limited to only the Central Acropolis at Tikal, my research has sought to apply his criteria to a number of sites in the Classic Period Maya world to see if his model still applies. What I am trying to say is that there is a possibility that Harrison’s techniques at Tikal were correct but as noted by Noble (1999), due to his bias seeking a single throne from which Tikal was governed by its ruler, he overlooked a number of other thrones. It is simple: there are just too many thrones for a single ruler.

As epigraphers decipher more of the Maya hieroglyphic signs, they recognize a greater number of “second tier” titles (Noble 1999:42-43). These titles reveal that the ruling elite of the Maya were not limited to just the K’uhul Ajaw (king) and his family, but included a “noble” class with a variety of duties (Martin and Grube 2008:15-18). This again points at problems with the Western idea of a throne. We view a throne as a singular, official seat only to be sat in by one supreme ruler at each site. It is possible for the Maya at Tikal that one “throne” was not enough: they needed multiple thrones to accommodate the bureaucracy associated with governing a multi-site empire. This idea then, could be translated to the smaller sites in my sample. Due to
their minor to midsized-center status, there was only one seat of authority and, therefore, only one “throne” needed at each site.

By comparing the structures and benches directly, important similarities and differences arise (Table 1). The most surprising similarity between these sites is the layout of the buildings themselves. All of the structures, including El Aguacaté Structure A4, incorporate side rooms that flank the central bench. Some of these side rooms are connected directly to the central bench room, as in Minanha, San Lorenzo and El Aguacaté, while the ones at Xunantunich and Nohoch Ek are partitioned off with their own entrances. Nevertheless, all the structures are formed by a three-roomed front.

Thus, even though the architecture of these structures may conform to specific parameters, the cultural debris, or lack there of, do not help in pointing out the general significance of the similar layouts. For instance, the side rooms at San Lorenzo SL-22 Structure 3, contain pits that Yaeger (2000:207-208) proposed were used for storage. Benches with armrests filled Rooms 1 and 3 at Xunantunich Structure A-15. MacKie (1985:83) believed that these benches “were for sleeping on since they are in what must have been the darkest parts of the building” but he does not report any artifacts that would substantiate this position. Minanha Structure 37J was presumably “swept clean” before being intentionally filled (Iannone 2006:154), leaving no artifacts to reveal its purpose. Like Minanha, Structure A4 at El Aguacaté lacks artifacts.

Only the bench at Nohoch Ek lacks armrests. As Harrison (2001) noted, these armrests give an added quality of monumentality to the benches. It is because of these armrests that the benches at Minanha and Xunantunich were labeled thrones in the literature and that Yaeger identifies the bench at San Lorenzo as a “seat of local authority” (2000:214).
The structures containing benches at Nohoch Ek, San Lorenzo and Minanha face a plaza. However, Minanha Structure 37J looks onto a plaza with restricted access, while the others join the public plaza at their sites. Xunantunich, Structure A-15 is also located in a public setting but not in association with the plaza. As mentioned, Structure A-15 is located between two of the main causeways leading into the site epicenter; however, “despite the impressive viewsheds of the structure’s frontal terrace, there is no evidence of easy access between Str. A-15 and the causeways, although modern road construction has altered the topography and archaeological record significantly” (Yaeger 2010:155). This suggests that although activities conducted on Structure A-15 could be publically viewed, access was restricted.

El Aguacaté poses a challenge. Neither a part of the public plaza nor separated by other architectural features (e.g. wall or raised plaza), it is difficult to tell whether Structure A4 was restricted. Certain, however, is its orientation—turned away from the public eye, which has the effect of signaling a private space.

This idea of public and private space leads to the idea of public and private audiences. As Takeshi Inomata has discussed (2006), theatricality and performance in large premodern societies were key elements of political propaganda and community cohesion. For the Maya, this meant the construction of large plaza spaces where outlying members of a site community could gather for various festivals and religious ceremonies (Inomata 2006:810).

As apparent in the Bonampak murals [Figure 50] and various ceramic paintings… symbolically and often physically, at the center of public gatherings was the body of the sovereign. Rulers were at once the sponsors, organizers, and protagonists of many of the large theatrical events. (Inomata 2006:818)
Certain architectural structures and features, such as staircases, would then serve to highlight these performances by placing the performer (the ruler) on a “stage” above the plaza, where he could be seen and or heard by groups of people (Inomata 2006:810-811).

All of the Belizean structures in this thesis emphasize the bench through their architectural design. Nohoch Ek, in fact, has three doorways as well as a frontal terrace, making the actors inside clearly visible from the central plaza (Coe and Coe 1956:376-377). Both Minanha Structure 37J and San Lorenzo Structure 3 contained one central doorway that allowed the person sitting on the bench to see out as well as focus attention of those in the plaza below (Iannone et. al. 2004:156; Yaeger 2000).

At Xunantunich Structure A-15 it is a bit more complicated. Although Yaeger (2010:155) questions whether a person on either of the causeways entering Xunantunich could see into the rooms atop Structure A-15, the terrace atop the stairway would proved an excellent stage for public ritual. Therefore, theatricality is still a possible feature of Structure A-15.

El Aguacaté, Structure A4 poses another puzzle when relating it to this idea of theatricality. It is obviously not associated with the public plaza at the site, and furthermore turned away from that area. The doorway into Structure A4, though slightly off center, still allows for visibility of the bench inside but unlike Minanha, Structure 37J’s restricted open plaza, the private courtyard (though not found in excavations to date) in front of Structure A4 is very small. This diminishes Inomata’s idea of performances as being elaborate and for some sort of public audience. Consequently, Structure A4 does not seem a likely setting for public or private festivals and ceremonies.
IMPLICATIONS

After review of these comparison structures I have decided that Structure A4 at El Aguacaté does not hold a “throne” in spite of the guidelines proposed by Harrison because it lacks theatricality.

Nohoch Ek is the obvious outlier in my sample because of its lack of armrests. While, Harrison would have thrown it out of his study, I believe it critical to my interpretations. I believe that the bench in Structure C at Nohoch Ek could be defined as a throne because it fulfills the vital function of theatricality. The bench is easily visible because of its size and the three doorways in front of it. It is placed inside a building that provides theatrical “stages” that include the frontal terrace and stairway and it faces out towards the public viewing area of the plaza.

The throne at Piedras Negras that also lacks armrests further challenges the criterion that a bench must have armrests.

Unlike, the throne benches at Piedras Negras and Nohoch Ek, the one in Structure A4 at El Aguacaté has armrests but, in my mind, cannot fulfill the crucial function of theatricality. As seen in the discussion, Structure A4 itself does not conform to the site plan examined at the other Maya sites. The bench lacks a large space to look out upon and could not serve as a seat for either a substantially sized public or even a private audience. After comparisons with other Maya sites, I believe that the key determinant for a bench to be identified as a throne is theatricality. Therefore, the bench in Structure A4 at El Aguacaté does not merit the label of “throne”.
The “Possibilities” Clause

As with all research, future research may challenge the interpretations provided in this thesis. I do, however, believe that this study is an important reminder to all archaeologists to test our assumptions. Harrison wrote his dissertation in 1970 and his work was cited in my sources that mentioned thrones. Although his studies have played a part in the way Mayanists look at benches, his guidelines have become an unchallenged fact. Fact: the word all archaeologists should be wary to say.
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Figure 1. Map of Mesoamerica, the Maya region (after McKillop 2004:4).
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Trench if fully excavated with unit numbers labeled:

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Actual excavated portions of the trench:

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The inclusion of Units 6 and 8 to Unit 6B:

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- **Unexcavated estimations**
- **Excavated Plaster floor**
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Table 1. Chart showing the comparison structures and the compared attributes discussed.