A Rural Sweat Bath at Piedras Negras, Guatemala

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Piedras Negras is justly famous for its sweat baths, which are both numerous and monumental in scale. Eight are known from the site core, most located near palace structures. Tatiana Proskouriakoff famously imagined how one of these was used (Fig. 1), but twenty years ago Mark Child went her one better and reconstructed the whole P-7 sweat bath (Figs. 2, 3). One of the high points during our fieldwork was firing up this royal sweat bath on weekends and using it, ostensibly as an exercise in experimental archaeology, but more importantly for surcease from the interminable boredom of camp life. Veterans of the Piedras Negras project will testify to the wonderful therapeutic qualities of the experience, which we eventually perfected, right down to the proper incense. We also discovered the key to ancient Maya air conditioning---one can't make oneself colder than one's surroundings, but one can bake oneself so hot that the ambient temperature seems delightful for hours afterwards. No doubt kings and nobles disported themselves in similar ways, and it turns out that ordinary people at Piedras Negras did so as well. Below is a short and belated report describing the little rural sweat bath that we discovered far from the royal purlieus and excavated during the 1998-99 field seasons. ¹

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¹ I gave a shorter version of this report at the SAA meetings in 2001. The field research was partly funded by the Piedras Negras Project directed by Stephen Houston and Hector Escobedo, and by grants to Webster from the National Geographic Society and the Heinz Family Foundation.
Ethnographers have long documented quotidian sweat baths built with a variety of materials. For example, about one in four houses in Tepoztlan had a bath shared by neighboring families (e.g., Cresson 1938; Redfield 1930). Aztec (Fig. 4) and other ethno-historically documented communities had small sweat baths that were directly attached to houses, in some cases those of prominent people.

Archaeologists know that many features of the Classic Maya Great Tradition had their roots in much earlier and humbler behaviors. For some reason sweat baths appear absent among the modern Maya of northern Yucatan, but they were widespread among their ancestors. A little sweat bath at Komchen dates to Mamom times (around 700-650 BC), and another at Cuello is even older, about 800 B.C. (Sharer 1994: 129; Hammond and Bauer 2001). Payson Sheets (2006) found a sweat bath preserved under volcanic debris at Ceren, where it served several separate households, as at Tepoztlan. Such modest sweat baths were presumably used at other ancient Maya sites in the central and southern Lowlands, but they are difficult to identify because of their small scale and often flimsy construction. More importantly, they are often physically detached from the civic and household remains we usually investigate and are likely to be found only fortuitously.

Just such a chance discovery of an apparent rural sweat bath at Piedras Negras was a by-product of Penn State settlement and household research carried out by Jennifer Kirker and Amy Kovak in the near-periphery of that center, where we recorded some 90 sites and 285 structures. Kovak and I followed up our surveys by extensively excavating five outlying sites. These were part of what seems to be a small Late Classic residential neighborhood about a 20 to 25 minute walk from the southern edge of the monumental site core (Fig. 5).
During the 1998 field season I began to strip Site BS-27, a small two-mound group (Fig. 6) overlooking the main solution valley leading south from Piedras Negras toward Yaxchilan. Like many such sites, BS-27 is perched on an outcrop projecting from a larger limestone hill, a stiff 25 m climb above the valley floor. While initially probing the site, which turned out to have two good-sized, rectangular buildings, my workmen began to find small stalactites. These, it turned out, originated in a small rock shelter about 20 m to the southeast and a bit higher up the hillside, as shown in a reconstruction drawing by Heather Hurst (Fig. 7). We had initially overlooked it because it was screened by dense vegetation. The shelter faced northwest and was about 20 m long, 4 m deep, and just high enough to stand in (Fig. 8). Despite the karstic geomorphology of the region, it is an unusual landscape feature. The shelter was unusually dry and cool inside, and I mentally noted it as a convenient place to store maize or other perishables. Apart from a few jar sherds there were no obvious surface features, so I ignored it until the
last day of the field season, when I returned to dig a quick test pit into the floor, which I assumed would be a deep accumulation of collapsed and weathered breakdown debris from the ceiling.

To my surprise, within a minute or two my workmen struck a well-preserved and black-stained plaster floor (Fig. 9) buried beneath 3-4 cm of fine powdery soil. Closer inspection revealed crude walls delimiting a small room-like structure. A layer of plaster with a minute trace of red paint was preserved on the base of the outer wall. This was very unusual because plaster surfaces were practically unknown at our peripheral sites. We took a soil sample and then covered up the floor until the next season.

Several visits to the rock shelter during the following year convinced us that the little structure was a sweat bath. Because sweat baths were subject of Mark Child's dissertation, I turned it over to him and his wife Jessica for excavation.² They exposed a small rectangular room about 1.4 x 1.9 m, bounded on three sides by very crude walls set in mud mortar, and on the fourth by the rear wall of the shelter (Figs. 10, 11).

² For some reason Mark Child chose not to include our little rural sweat bath in his dissertation, hence this brief overview.
Plaster flooring was preserved over only the western part of the room interior, where it lapped up to meet the wall, and there was a doorway just big enough for a small person to crawl through. The three walls of the little building must originally have served as the low basal supports for some sort of perishable superstructure because there was very little collapse rubble. Presumably this superstructure extended up to the natural rock ceiling (Fig. 12). Probably no more than 2-3 people could have squeezed themselves into the little room (2.7 sq m) at any one time. Just outside the doorway was a raised area of soil and rubble that seems to have been some sort of exterior vestibule, but it was extremely amorphous and had no well-defined edges.
Unlike other small Mesoamerican sweat baths, ours has no formal firebox, either inside as at Ceren or outside. Instead there were burned and calcified rocks near the rear wall, similar to those found in the royal sweat baths. Water was apparently simply sprinkled on these rocks, preheated elsewhere, to create steam. Ash and moisture from the hot rocks eventually discolored the plaster floor. Water, of course, was necessary, and the remains of a large broken jar were found just outside the east wall. During the rainy season water could probably have been collected from drip-channels at the front of the rock shelter itself.

That this little building was a special place is shown by several special finds made by the Childs just outside the room (Figs. 11, 13). The first was a fragment of a small circular mirror originally about 8-9 cm in diameter. It had been pierced for suspension and there was orange-painted plaster on its rim. It was not made of obsidian, but rather of some short of heavy, probably ferrous mineral. There were also four marine shells. Two of these, a *Busycon contrarium* and an *Oliva sp.*, were nested inside some sort of bivalve shell, possibly a pelycapod (the fourth shell is unidentified). *Busycon* and *Olivia* are native to the Caribbean and Atlantic coasts. There was also the fragment of an obsidian blade and part of a bone awl or needle. While the mirror and the shells might not seem special to most Mayanists, they were the most exotic items found anywhere in our rural excavations, which normally produced household assemblages of numbing monotony. The general BS-27 artifact collection is otherwise standard for rural household remains, and we found no other hints that the site was any kind of special place.

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3 Randolph Widmer kindly identified the shells.
One further feature of the locale deserves mention. At the eastern end of the rock shelter, just a few meters from the sweat bath, is a natural fissure in the limestone (Fig. 14) that during certain times of the day exudes a current of cool air. One can imagine that this was not only physically gratifying to the ancient Maya, but also redolent of earth, wind, and water. And because sweat baths themselves are small, dark, cave-like places, what could be more appropriate than building one in a rock-shelter?
Clearly the cave was not a mere storage facility. If we have correctly identified our little sweat bath, it is one of the simplest known in the southern Maya Lowlands, although distinguished by unusual construction features such as its painted, plastered walls, and by the distinctive associated artifacts. Perhaps each of our rural sites had such a detached facility, or perhaps because of its unusual setting our sweat bath, like those of Ceren or Tepoztlan, served part of a larger community or neighborhood. In any case, it appears that while kings at Piedras Negras enjoyed their royal ablutions, their subjects perpetuated a more modest, but probably much older, folk tradition of sweat-bathing.

REFERENCES


ILLUSTRATION CREDITS

Fig. 1: From Proskouriakoff (1978), page 29.
Figs. 2, 3: Webster field photos.
Fig. 4: From Codex Magliabechiano (Nuttal 1903: 65).
Fig. 5: Map by Zachary Nelson and Timothy Murtha.
Fig. 6: Field plan by Webster; reconstruction drawing by Heather Hurst.
Fig. 7: Reconstruction drawing by Heather Hurst.
Figs. 8, 9: Field photos by Webster.
Fig. 10: Field photos by Mark Child.
Figs. 11, 12; Adapted by Webster from field drawings by Mark Child.
Fig. 13: Adapted by Webster from field photos by Mark Child.
Fig. 14: Reconstruction drawing by Heather Hurst.