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PAYSON D. SHEETS

# DOMESTIC RITUAL IN ANCIENT MESOAMERICA

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# Household Production of Extra-Household Ritual at the Cerén Site, El Salvador

Linda A. Brown, Scott E. Simmons, and Payson Sheets

**T**he Cerén site, located in the Zapotitán Valley of El Salvador (figure 8.1), was a thriving Classic period village when around AD 650 (Dull, Southon, and Sheets 2001) a volcanic vent opened up beneath the nearby Río Sucio and buried the community under 6 m of ash (Sheets 1992). The eruption precipitated a catastrophic abandonment of the community, leaving virtually complete artifact assemblages in their context of use, storage, or discard in addition to preserving fragile earthen architecture, giving archaeologists an unprecedented view of village life on the southeast Maya periphery in the seventh century.

Sheets (1992) has led archaeological investigations at the site since 1978. Excavated areas include domestic buildings, ceremonial structures, a civic building, a midden, and various agricultural zones. To date, a total of seventeen structures have been excavated including domestic domiciles, storerooms, a kitchen, a civic building (structure 3), a communal sweat bath (structure 9), and two ceremonial buildings on the east side of the site, structures 10 and 12.

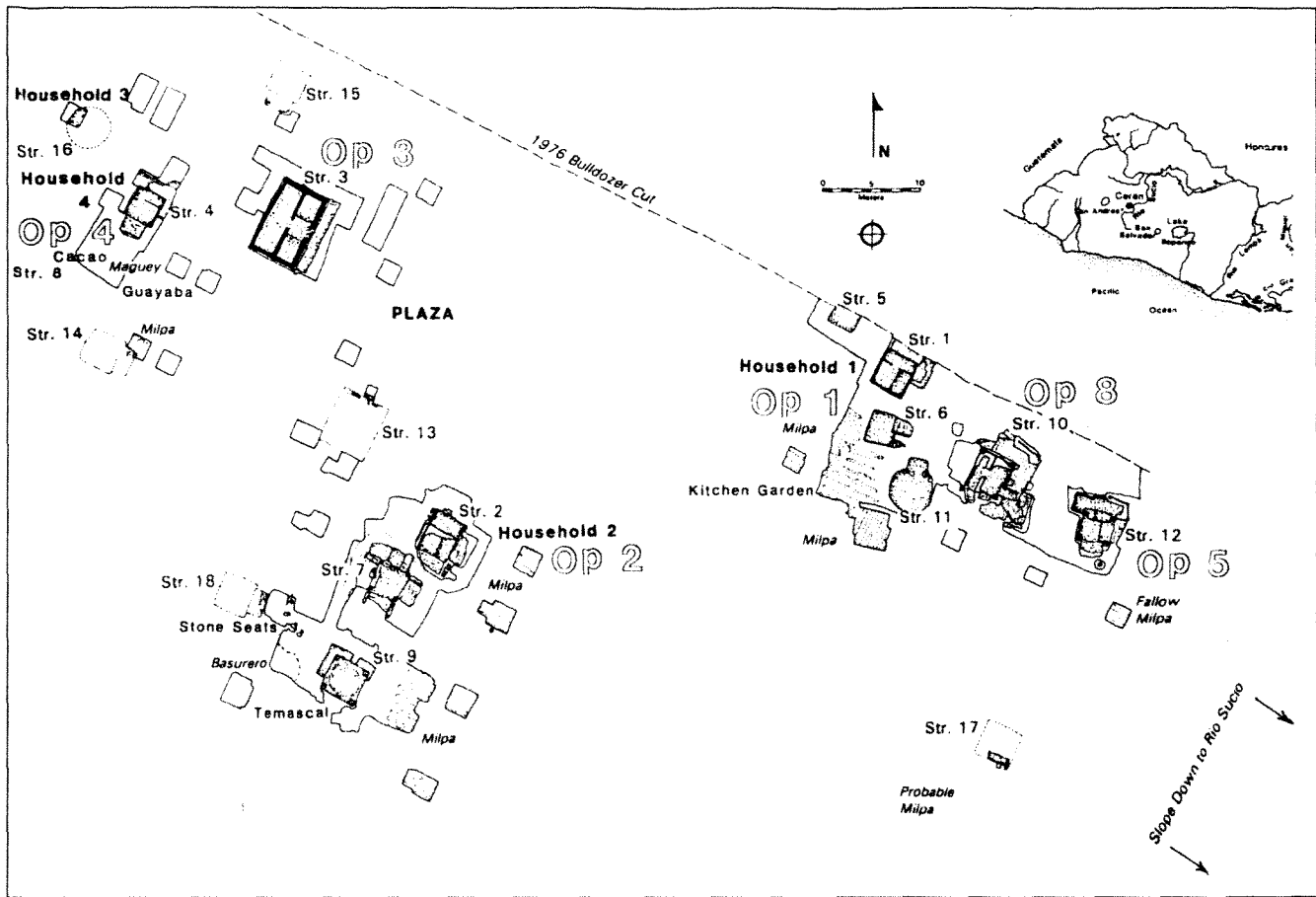
Archaeological evidence for household-sponsored ceremonial activity in the ancient village is our focus in this chapter. Unlike many other Mesoamerican sites, Cerén provides limited evidence of ritual activities occurring within the confines of domestic structures themselves. Instead, it appears that households focused more on the production of extra-household or community-based ceremonies. Artifacts recovered in one household context, known as household 1, appear to be related to the staging of community rituals at nearby ceremonial structures, reminding us that some items used for public rituals may be found in domestic contexts and reflect a blending be-

tween the conceptual dichotomy between domestic and public. Similarly, members of Cerén's households may have used structure 12 for divinations and other ritual consultations. The apparent emphasis placed on extra-household ceremonialism likely reflects a priority placed on the creation and replication of supra-household relations.

Below we begin with a brief review of the evidence for ceremonial behavior occurring within domestic structures. Then we turn to a summary discussion of the architecture and artifact assemblages in two permanent ceremonial buildings, structures 10 and 12. Structure 10 was used for the production of community festivals that included public feasting and the display of deer ceremonial objects (Brown and Gerstle 2002; Gerstle 1992, 1993). Meanwhile, structure 12 appears to have been used by a ritual practitioner who engaged in divinations (Sheets and Sheets 1990, Sheets and Simmons 1993, Simmons and Sheets 2002). After discussing these two ceremonial buildings, we present evidence suggesting that individuals living in household 1 may have engaged in part-time ritual specialization through involvement with festivals at structure 10 and perhaps ritual activities occurring in structure 12.

## Household Ritual Within Domestic Buildings

The strongest evidence of ritual activity occurring within the confines of domestic structures is inferred from the distribution of *incensarios* at the site. Each domestic building contained one ceramic vessel for burning incense offerings (Beaudry-Corbett 2002). In contrast, none of the ceremonial or civic buildings contained any incense burners. The presence of *incensarios* only in



8.1 Cerén Site, El Salvador

domestic structures strongly suggests that burning incense was a ritual activity associated with household ceremonialism. Moreover, each household had at least one ladle-handled incensario with a unique zoomorphic or anthropomorphic effigy figure on the handle. The unique effigy figure on ladle incensarios may represent deities associated with certain families or lineages.

But while the distribution of censers at Cerén suggests household ritual activity, other artifacts typically associated with domestic ritual in Mesoamerica are scarce at the site (see chapters 4, 6, and 9). For example, while figurines are often associated with household ceremonialism, only four fired clay figurine fragments and one carved bone figurine have been found at Cerén to date. Of these, two were from the ceremonial building structure 12, while only two were from a domestic context. A clay figure was recovered in household 1 and the bone figurine was found in household 4's bodega. One clay figurine was recovered from a midden behind the sweat bath.

Early Colonial sources reported that bloodletting was practiced by Maya commoners, as well as the elite, and

was associated with agricultural rituals, deer hunting, and fishing (Tozzer 1941:155–156, 160). Yet ritual bloodletting instruments, such as bone perforators and stingray spines, are not found at Cerén. And while one obsidian blade from the site tested positive to human antiserum in blood residue analysis (Newman 1993), it was not found in a domestic context but instead in structure 10. Similarly, musical instruments associated with ritual, such as turtle-shell drums (Tozzer 1941), have not been found in domestic contexts at Cerén, and fired clay whistles, ocarinas, and rattles are entirely absent.

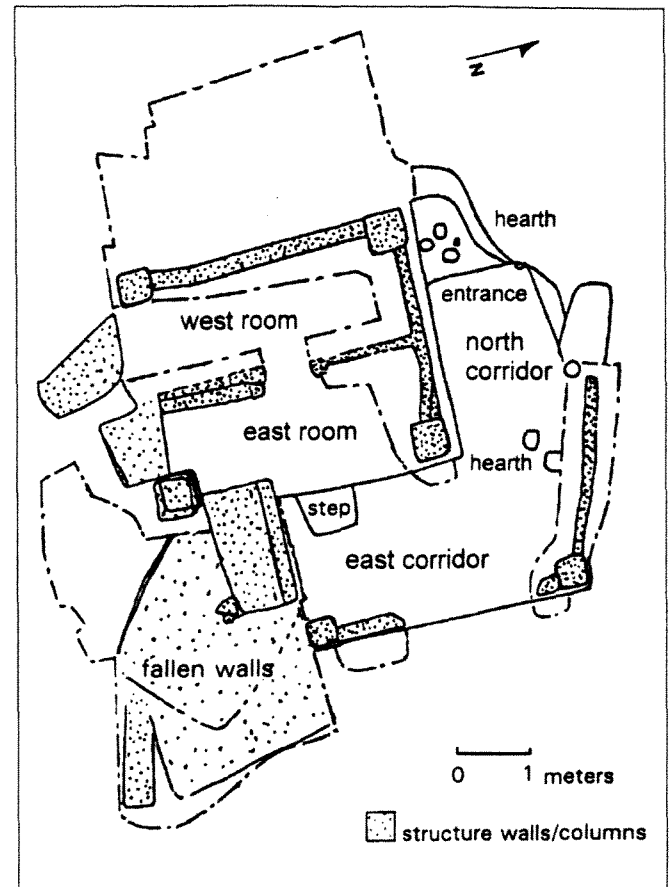
Scholars have argued that the Maya elite and commoners engaged in ancestor veneration with concomitant domestic rites (for example, Carlsen and Prechtel 1991, McAnany 1995). Archaeological remains that might be used to infer domestic ancestor veneration, such as the processing and curation of skulls (or other skeletal elements) in family sacred huts or on family altars as reported by Landa (Tozzer 1941), have not been found at Cerén. Similarly, features associated with domestic ritual, such as altars within domestic structures or household plaza and domestic shrines, are not present at the site.

Some of the lack of evidence for domestic ritual at Cerén may be the by-product of the original mode of abandonment and much later archaeological building conservation practices at the site. Concerning the former, the rapid catastrophic abandonment of the site precluded engaging in the common household ceremonial activity—house termination rites. Ethnographers have noted that throughout Mesoamerica domestic structures are ritually terminated upon abandonment. Often termination rites involve dismantling various architectural elements, especially corner supporting posts or roofs, then offering incense, prayers, and smashing household goods as a mechanism for deactivating the spirit of the building (for example, Stross 1998).

Other potential sources of data on household ritual practices are precluded by conservation practices at Cerén. Because the preservation of such earthen architecture is atypical in the tropics, we do not excavate into the fragile structure floors. Any potential information that might be gleaned from subfloor burials and caches is therefore unavailable. Subfloor caches are generally thought to relate to dedication rituals. Among the contemporary Maya, house dedicatory rituals involve caching objects, such as chickens and food offerings, within the floors of new buildings during or immediately after construction. These household ceremonies are seen as the mechanism through which a new structure is activated or animated, thereby providing the necessary protection for the new inhabitants (Stross 1998).

While architectural conservation practices at Cerén do not allow us to dig into structure floors, recent research using ground-penetrating radar showed a subfloor anomaly in a civic building called structure 3 (Conyers 1996). The anomaly, measuring almost a meter in diameter and height, is located in the center of the building and under a doorway in an interior dividing wall. Situated on the building's primary central axis, this anomaly is almost certainly a dedicatory feature, suggesting that Cerén residents may have engaged in dedicatory rituals perhaps as a means to activate and animate structures, as seen among the contemporary Maya.

In spite of the disadvantage of not having access to subfloor caches and burials at Cerén, the ethnographic literature, early Colonial sources, and evidence of household ritual from other archaeological contexts would suggest that household ceremonial artifacts with associated ritual features should have been present in a systemic use context at Cerén if domestic ritual played an important role in the ancient commu-

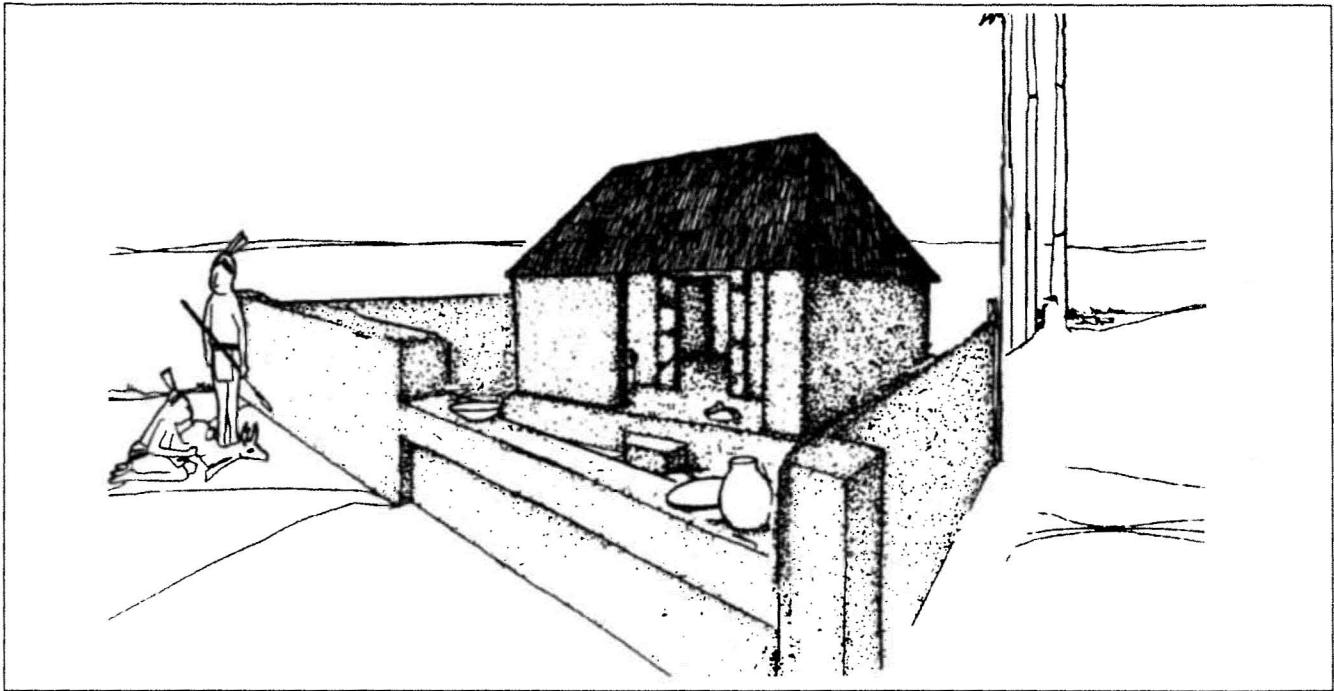


8.2 Plan view of structure 10

nity. Instead, it appears that the bulk of household labor and resources designated for ceremonial activities was allocated to the production of ritual activities that would have transcended the single household and involved groups of individuals from multiple households. As will become apparent, artifacts recovered in household 1 suggest that this household compound was the locus of work related to ceremonialism at nearby structure 10.

### Structure 10

Structure 10 is located 5 m west of household 1 and 5 m east of structure 12 (see figure 8.1). Both architectural components and the artifact assemblage suggest that structure 10 was a special-use building that served a nonresidential function. Specifically, structure 10 was utilized for production of community festivals and the storage of festival paraphernalia. Festivals at Cerén included feasting and the display of white-tailed deer stag ceremonial items. The following section is a condensed version of Brown and Gerstle (2002) and, except where otherwise noted, the



8.3 Reconstruction of structure 10 (with roof over walled corridors not depicted). Illustration by Karen Kievit

following descriptions and interpretations are derived from the latter.

Structure 10 is a thatch-roof wattle-and-daub building constructed on a square platform and oriented approximately 23 degrees east of magnetic north (figure 8.2). The superstructure has two rooms: an east (front) room and a west (back) room. A wall, constructed outside of this superstructure, encloses the east and north sides of the building, forming two exterior corridors. A half-height wall (69–70 cm) was constructed between the middle and north columns along the eastern corridor wall (figure 8.3).

The only access into structure 10 was through a pole door located at the western end of the north corridor. Artifacts and features indicate that the north corridor primarily was used for food preparation. Two hearths are associated with this area, one just outside the doorway while a second hearth was located inside the corridor. A large jar was found in situ directly on top of hearth 1, and several shelled corncobs had been discarded nearby. A metate mounted on forked wooden supports was positioned near the inside hearth, and a large open bowl placed on the floor under the lower end of the metate presumably was used to catch the ground food. A pole shelf extended over the north corridor and most of the fallen artifacts were probably dislodged from this shelf. Fallen items include smaller food preparation items, such as an antler

and bone tools probably used to husk corn, an obsidian prismatic blade, and six ceramic vessels.

The east corridor primarily was used for ceramic vessel storage as indicated by the 14 medium to large ceramic vessels stored here (Beaudry-Corbett 2002). As at least one-third of the corridor remains buried under fallen walls, it is likely that more artifacts remain buried here. In addition to the recovered vessels, a digging stick, consisting of perforated “donut” stone with a long stick through the center, was found leaning against the east wall of the superstructure. Two clusters of fallen artifacts were noted in the eastern corridor. The first consisted of carbonized ears of corn, a painted organic cylindrical object, two obsidian blades, a greenstone celt, five bone artifacts, a spindle whorl, four donut stones, and numerous cobbles. A second cluster, located in the northern end of the corridor area along the eastern exterior wall, included two obsidian blade fragments, two sherds, and numerous cobbles.

Moving up into the superstructure, the east room is the only painted room in the structure with the eastern face of the dividing wall, cornices, and door pilasters painted red while the lower section of the pilasters was covered with a layer of white paint. This room was used for the storage of special-use and unique items. A deer skull headdress apparently fell from storage when a high shelf collapsed during the eruption. The headdress consisted of a complete cranium (minus the mandible) of an adult white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) stag. The

skull had been painted red and was found with twine tied around the base of the antlers, presumably for tying the mask to a wearer during ceremonial activities. In addition to the deer skull headdress, other fallen items dislodged from the high shelf or nearby wall or column tops included two jars, three obsidian blades, an unidentified painted organic object with a flared rim, a long bone tool, a greenstone celt, and components to a possible dance costume that included two large tubular bone beads, a "tear drop" shaped flat bone ornament, and a shaped scapula from a juvenile white-tailed deer. Additionally, ears of corn scattered in the east corridor may have been dislodged from this shelf.

Three large jars and a painted gourd were found in situ on the east room floor. One of the vessels, a caiman effigy jar, was full of *achiote* seeds (*Bixa orellana*) while another jar contained squash seeds (*Cucurbita* sp.). An inverted ceramic ring base, fashioned from a recycled polychrome vessel base, was stored inside the gourd.

In contrast to the special-use artifacts stored in the east room, the west room primarily was used for storage of utilitarian items. Artifacts stored in elevated contexts included a bone tool fashioned from the scapula of a white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) and a recurved bowl. Two large utilitarian jars, one of which contained impressions of seeds similar in appearance to beans, were stored on the floor.

Excavations focusing on the use of outdoor space around structure 10 revealed that the areas to the north and northeast of the building were relatively free of artifacts and vegetation, suggesting an area that was well swept and maintained (Simmons and Villalobos 1993). The lack of artifacts in this area was particularly notable when compared with the ground to the southeast of structure 10, which was littered with artifacts, had an undulating ground surface with loose soil, and was scattered with plants and bushes. Presumably, the cleared, hard-packed ground to the north and east of structure 10 was the area in which participants gathered for ceremonies.

#### Building modifications

With the exception of building alignment, the original building and architectural features of structure 10 follow the same plan as domiciles at the site: a two-room superstructure constructed on an elevated square platform and a centrally placed door in the interior wall that allowed access into the back room where the "sleeping" bench was located. At some point in its life history, structure 10 underwent a series of renovations. The low

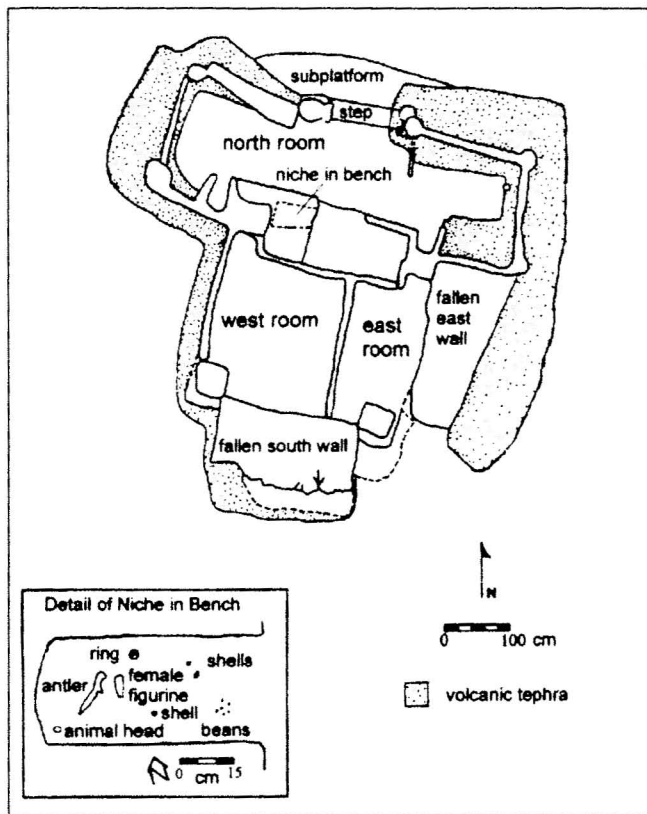
clay floor was constructed and walls were erected restricting access into this area. The building addition was roofed and a food preparation and storage area created. A new doorway was built in the north wall of the corridor to be later moved to the west wall opening toward household 1. The sleeping bench was obliterated and buried during a renovation in which the entire floor level of the back room was raised.

#### Summary

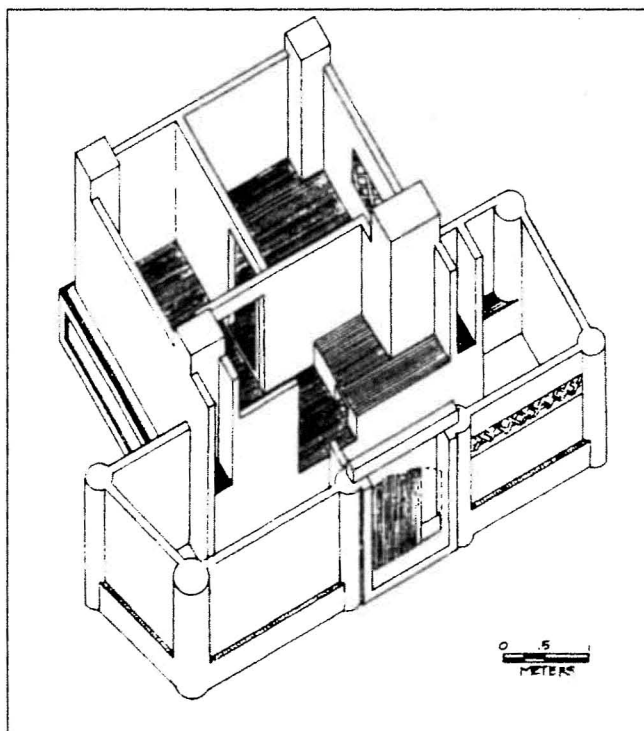
Structure 10 was a permanent nondomestic building that was utilized for the storage of food, ceramic vessels, and tools for the preparation of community feasts as well as ceremonial items made from white-tailed deer. Different kinds of items were stored in spatially discrete areas within the building. Almost half of all ceramic vessels in structure 10 were stored in the east corridor, and the low wall may have been used as a pass-through for serving food. The north corridor primarily was used for the storage of food preparation items and a few serving vessels, with cooking activities as a secondary focus. Meanwhile, rare or unique artifacts were stored in the east room while the west room contained common utilitarian items. This pattern may have been paralleled by vessel contents as well. For example, beans were stored in the west room while the east room contained a large quantity of *achiote* seeds.

The ethnographic literature notes that contemporary Maya use *achiote* as a food coloring, an addition to stews, or mixed with squash, chili, honey, and maize to make special ceremonial breads (Coe 1994). Meanwhile, the Lacandon Maya use *achiote* to make red paint, symbolic of human blood and sacrifice, which is applied to beams in ceremonial structures, ritual clothing, incensarios, and the bodies of ritual participants to animate or ceremonially "awaken" them (McGee 1998). Cerén residents probably added *achiote* to festival food as is done by the contemporary Maya. However, the large quantities of *achiote* seeds stored in structure 10 also would suggest its use in making ceremonial paint.

In addition to the rare and unique items, several obsidian blades fell from an elevated storage context in the eastern room. Interestingly, one of these blades tested positive for human antiserum in blood residue analysis (Newman 1993). This blood may have been the result of a cut during manufacture or use. But the frequent mention of bloodletting in early Colonial documents (see Landa in Tozzer 1941) and by Classic-period Maya artists (for example, Schele and Miller 1986), in combination with the



8.4 Plan view of structure 12



8.5 Isomorphic drawing of structure 12. Illustration by Karen Kievit

context of this blade in a ceremonial building, would support the interpretation of use in deliberate bloodletting in conjunction with rituals.

The archaeological evidence from structure 10 suggests that village festivals involved the consumption of food, probably drink, and display of white-tailed deer ceremonial paraphernalia perhaps in the context of dancing with the deer skull headdress. More speculatively, Cerén festivals may have involved applying red paint to ceremonial participants and/or ritual items, and human bloodletting.

Festivals were frequent enough for hosts to continuously maintain a permanent building solely dedicated to the production of community festivals. Elsewhere it was argued that the building plan and architectural features of structure 10 suggest that it was originally a domestic structure that was converted into a ceremonial space, perhaps for use as a rural lineage house (Brown 2001). If this hypothesis is correct, then the deviation in the structure 10 building alignment and wider columns supporting the superstructure would suggest that original occupants of structure 10 held a distinctive status in the community. The transformation of certain domestic structures into ceremonial locales after the death of an important lineage member is a common pattern seen throughout the Maya Lowlands (for example, McAnany 1995:161) and the renovations to structure 10 may reflect this practice. Grove and Gillespie (chapter 2) suggest that during the Middle Formative two buildings at Chalcatzingo appear to have undergone similar transformations in function, suggesting this practice may have great time depth in Mesoamerica.

### Structure 12<sup>1</sup>

The objective here is to present an overview of architecture and artifacts, followed by interpretations of building use and relationships with members of Cerén's households. Based on those data, we believe that a ritual practitioner who engaged in divinations worked in this building.

Structure 12 was built upon the highest topographic elevation within the Cerén site, an observation that may reflect the common Mesoamerican belief that increasing height is one mechanism to facilitate supernatural access (for example, Miller and Taube 1993). During the first stage of construction, an earthen mound was built with edges that aligned with the drip line from the thatch roof for drainage purposes. Then, an approximately 3-m square platform was built with a square solid earthen col-

umn at each corner (figure 8.4). The top of the platform was some 70 cm above the original ground surface. Structure 12 is oriented approximately 15 degrees east of north (or south of east), setting it strikingly apart from the dominant orientation of 30 degrees followed by domestic and public architecture as well as agricultural features. The platform was decorated with rounded cornices running along all corners. Numerous inner walls and small wing walls were built, creating the most architecturally complex building found at the site (figure 8.5). The building has four internal principal walls and six small wing walls; the latter generally create vertical niches. The walls must have been built at about the same time that the floors were because each successive room had a higher floor, moving from the north room up past the bench into the vestibule, then up into the east room, and finally up into the largest room in the southwest corner of the building. Probably the farther one proceeds in the building, the farther one is from the secular domain and the closer to the supernatural. A bench with a horizontal niche was built onto the northern corner of the platform, with the span held up by a *laja* lintel. Vertical niches were constructed inside and outside the northern two columns. The vertical niches apparently were special places and used often, judging from the use-polish and organic staining of their bottom surfaces, particularly the ones north of the two front columns. The one south of the northeast column was surfaced with wood ash, and a small *mano* was placed on top of the wood ash.

The walls were of *bajareque* construction, with the poles extending above the mudded portions to support the roof. The thatch roof was close-cropped, with the drip line only a few centimeters beyond the edge of the platform, in striking contrast to most domestic and public buildings. Most domestic and public buildings have more area under the thatch roofs outside their walls than they have inside their walls, providing ample areas for storage, activities, crafts, and other functions. Perhaps the builders of structure 12 did not provide similar open protected space in its environs as a means of discouraging inappropriate secular activities adjacent to the building.

A broad enclosure was constructed to the north of the formal square platform to create the front room. The walls of the enclosure were built with the most fragile materials found at the site: a sandwich of Ilopango volcanic ash (called *Tierra Blanca Joven*, or "tbj") surfaced with a thin layer of clay inside and out. All walls and columns of the building were painted white; the pigment is a mixture of the tbj tephra and an organic binder. Portions of

the walls in the north room were decorated with hematite red paint, some of which may have been a floral or possibly a linear design, but preservation was insufficient to know for certain.

The north room had a floor lower than any room on the platform but considerably higher than the ground surface outside. Each corner and the doorway of that enclosure is anchored with a round column; the doorway columns were later squared in the door jam and sockets created to lock the front door in place. The two horizontal poles of the double-thickness front door would enter the sockets. That there is only 90 cm from the floor of the north room to the bottom of the lintel indicates the restriction on access to the interior. To enter, one would have to bend the door to free the horizontal poles from the sockets, crawl into the building, and then re-insert the door. A lattice window was constructed in the wall west of the door, and in the west wall of the main innermost room, presumably for communication. Close examination of the ground surface on all sides of the building indicated that most foot traffic approached the front door from the north, and almost as much foot traffic headed around the building west and then south to the other lattice window. Many artifacts were placed on top of the lintel over the doorway or on the column tops on either side of the doorway, perhaps as offerings or payments for services rendered and/or as individual objects ritually collected in antiquity.

A total of thirty-three artifacts were found in situ. Most of the artifacts could be used by either gender, but all the artifacts that are gender-specific are associated with women. No male-associated artifacts were found in or around the building. The diviner was therefore probably a woman (Sweely 1999). Artifacts include twelve whole vessels, all but one of which were Guazapa Mititlan utilitarian vessels (Beaudry-Corbett 2002). Their paste has the same recipe as the vessels in structure 10 and household 1 but not the other households or localities at the site (Beaudry-Corbett 2002). Two of the pots are "*chicha* jars." *Chicha* is a fermented maize drink still served in traditional communities in El Salvador. Both of these jars have modeled anthropomorphic faces on their necks. One of them was resting on large *Olivella* shell beads. The nonutilitarian vessel is a paint pot, a finely made miniature frog effigy pot containing a small amount of cinnabar (HgS). The other artifacts include three *manos*, one metate, a worked stone, and a greenstone disk. Obsidian artifacts included a macroblade and three old used and dulled prismatic blade fragments. Two



painted gourds, two fired clay figurines, a deer antler, some shells, a mineral collection, two piles of beans, and a fiber mat ring encircling a vessel neck were also found.

One might expect the niche in the bench to be a special storage place and the artifacts there may have been a supernatural tool kit of a diviner practicing in the building. The artifacts in the bench niche were a deer antler drilled with numerous tiny holes (possibly for feather insertion), a female human figurine, an animal head figurine, half of a ceramic double ring, shell fragments, and a small pile of beans. The beans may have been used for divination as documented among Maya diviners today (for example, Vogt 1969, Wagley 1949). The storage of beans in structure 12, directly on the floor or in the niche, is notable because beans were never stored in contact with a floor or other earthen surface in domestic contexts. The handful of beans in structure 12 were not therefore being stored as food items but were likely used for divination.

The widespread practice of ritual collecting among contemporary Maya ritual practitioners suggests a hypothesis for why prismatic blades with no remaining use life, the broken Preclassic double ring, or other artifacts with evidence suggesting postdepositional damage were stored in structure 12 (Brown 2000). Today rural ritual practitioners pick up items with supernatural significance, particularly during their initial recruitment, that act as media by which dream knowledge and curative or divinatory powers emanate. These collected items are used for accessing the supernatural domain and figure prominently in divinations, healing, spirit contact, or other ritual activities. It is conceivable that the collected items in structure 12 at Cerén served a similar function for the ritual practitioner.

### Summary

Structure 12 was most likely a special-use ceremonial building for divination or other ritual activities not as easily inferred from the archaeological record. While the following sequence of events is admittedly speculative, we propose that an individual and perhaps his or her family members in need of a divination or other consultation may have approached the building from the north and discussed the issue with the ritual practitioner through the lattice window to the right of the doorway. When an accord was reached, the individual may have stepped up on the front step of the building and left an offering or payment for services at the doorway. Two lines of evidence support this scenario: the comparatively

dense cluster of small, fallen items recovered under the door lintel and the extremely worn, abraded surface and edge of the step. Next, the individual receiving consultation may have proceeded around the building to the west-facing lattice window to receive the results of the divination. While they are speculative, these patterns of movement around the north and west sides of the building are strongly suggested by (1) the highly trampled, compacted ground surface, (2) the absence of plants or other vegetation in these areas, and (3) the extremely low numbers and small sizes of artifacts present on the ground surface in these areas. Analogy with contemporary Maya would suggest that the divination was done with the minerals and/or beans stored in structure 12, and thus it may have involved either casting and counting lots or scrying with larger minerals. Because all gender-specific artifacts are female associated, the ritual practitioner was probably a woman (Sweely 1999). How she used the vertical niches is unclear, but the unusual cluster of items carefully stored in the horizontal niche suggests that this is where she kept her personal sacra. If the successively higher floor elevations represented the multiple levels of the universe, then perhaps moving from one room to the next represented symbolically traversing those planes.

## Linkages Between Households and Ceremonial Buildings

### Household 1 and activities at structures 10 and 12

Of the household clusters excavated to date, household 1 is the best known (Beaudry-Corbett et al. 2002). It consists of three separate buildings—a kitchen (structure 11), a storeroom (structure 6), and a domicile (structure 1)—in addition to a covered open work area (structure 5) and cleared outdoor activity areas around the compound and agricultural zones. Both the architecture and artifact assemblage suggest that household 1 may have been involved in the production of festivals at structure 10 and, perhaps, ritual activities in structure 12. Artifacts found in the domestic context here reflect the household members' involvement in sponsoring community rituals.

Starting with the architecture, both the proximity and modification to building plan suggest a linkage between household 1 members and activities at structure 10. Concerning the former, structure 10 is located only 5 m east of household 1. Meanwhile, one of the renovations made to structure 10 consisted of changing the location of the only entranceway into the building. At some point prior to the eruption a north-facing entranceway was closed off

and a new doorway was built facing west, directly toward household 1. Similarly, access into the household 1 storeroom was through a door that opened east toward structure 10. This is notable as other domestic storerooms face north, opening toward the household domicile. These modifications may have facilitated the movement of people and goods between the household 1 storeroom and structure 10.

The artifact assemblage also suggests a linkage between household 1 and activities at structures 10. Household 1 had a total of five functional metates, four of which were mounted on forked sticks (*horquetas*) while one was resting on the ground next to two holes that may have held *horquetas*. This number of metates, in use or temporary storage contexts, suggests that women were grinding more maize than would be necessary for household consumption alone. While it is conceivable that a surplus of maize could have been produced for private domestic celebrations, evidence indicating that a large quantity of food was cooked at structure 10, only 5 m to the east, would suggest that the household 1 compound was periodically used for bulk food grinding associated with public feasts.

The interpretation of periodic large-scale food preparation at household 1 also is supported by use-wear on the metates, the distribution of bone and antler corn huskers (*tapiscadores*), and the ceramic assemblage. Concerning the former, of the five metates present only one, recovered in situ on the kitchen floor, showed evidence of heavy use-wear suggesting that it was the main metate used daily by this household. The remaining four metates displayed only slight use-wear suggesting that they were only used periodically, a material expectation that matches intermittent use for grinding food for occasional feasts.

Three bone and/or antler *tapiscadores* were recovered in structure 10, but none were found in household 1. Assuming that *tapiscadores*, like metates, were a basic tool used daily by all households in an agricultural community, the lack of corn huskers in household 1 suggests that some or all of the *tapiscadores* in structure 10 may have moved back and forth between these locations, depending on the amount of corn processing in either place.

Additional linkages can be inferred from the ceramic assemblage. Beaudry-Corbett (2002) has noted that household 1 had more utilitarian bowls with handles than did other households, suggesting a greater need for transferring and transporting goods. Additionally, they had more large jars without handles than did other Cerén households, a pattern consistent with more need for

long-term food storage. These observations lead Beaudry-Corbett (2002) to suggest that household 1 ceramic assemblage may reflect the household's role in feasting at structure 10.

Additionally, ceramic compositional analyses suggest further linkages between this household and both structures 10 and 12. These analyses showed that one local and two nonlocal red wares had a restricted distribution within the community and occurred exclusively in household 1 and structures 10 and 12 (Beaudry-Corbett 2002). The restricted distribution of imported red wares led Beaudry-Corbett (2002) to suggest that members of household 1 were participating in a geographically broader socioeconomic network than other households excavated to date, perhaps reflecting a religious-political role that extended beyond the immediate community.

### Ceremonial buildings

The archaeological evidence suggests a relationship between structures 10 and 12 whereby these buildings formed part of a village ceremonial system. This linkage is inferred from several lines of evidence including physical proximity, structure orientation, wall treatment, architectural details, and the ceramic assemblage. Concerning proximity, structures 10 and 12 are only 5 m apart and the low "serving" wall along the east corridor of structure 10 opens to directly face structure 12. Structures 10 and 12 are the only two buildings that do not follow the dominant 30 degrees east of north axis seen in all other buildings at the site. Moreover, only these two structures were painted. Special treatment was given to columns in both buildings as seen in the vertical niches in structure 12 or the size of the adobe columns supporting structure 10. Additionally, a large enclosure-corridor was added to the original square building of both structures 10 and 12. Finally, ceramic analyses showed restricted distribution of two nonlocal and one local red wares in the ancient community and these were found exclusively in household 1 and structures 10 and 12 (Beaudry-Corbett 2002).

### Divination and Festivals

Although the archaeological evidence suggests that structures 10 and 12 were linked and may have functioned as part of a rural ceremonial system, it is clear that these buildings served very different functions in the ancient community. The question arises as to whether divination at structure 12 was linked with activities occurring at structure 10.

While limited, there is some information in early Colo-

nial sources suggesting linkages between divination and Contact-period festivals. In the following passage, originally recorded by the chronicler Roman, then preserved by Ximénez and translated by Early (1983), the close relationship between divination and the timing of festivals is clear:

The Indians of Guatemala have two types of sacrifices. One is general in as much as the whole town together offers sacrifices during the festivals which they celebrate. The other type consists of the private sacrifices which each citizen and private person offers according to his own devotion and for whatever necessity he has. The community sacrifices are usually offered during the festivals which are held five or six times a year in some provinces or at any time if a particular necessity should demand it. (Las Casas specifically mentions lack of rain, sickness, war.) For each sacrifice a meeting is held by the leader of the province or town together with the town elders, the high priest and the other priests of the forthcoming festival. There they decide what sacrifices are to be made and what must be done. As for the time of the sacrifice, they do not decide this nor would they even think of it. Rather divinations must be performed and this alone dictates the time. They call a diviner and inform him of the festival or problem and the required sacrifices. They request him to perform divinations to know what day would be the best and most propitious to make the sacrifices. The diviner gives the results of his divination with such forcefulness that they dare not make any changes in his instructions. With the date of the festival determined, the priests of the festival begin their vigil. (Roman translated by Early [1983])

As is evident in this passage, a local diviner rather than those in charge of the festival determined the timing of community festivals with accompanying sacrifices.

Friar Diego de Landa also noted that divination was used to set festival dates (Tozzer 1941). He recorded one festival held during the month of Zip that linked diviners and "hunters" who performed a dance with a deer-skull headdress (Tozzer 1941:154–155). Specifically, Landa noted that on the first day of Zip the "physicians" and "sorcerers" gathered together in one of their houses with their ceremonial items. Each opened a bundle that contained their divination tools and figurines so that the presiding *chacs* could smear these implements with a blue pigment. After this "anointing," the ritual objects were danced and all became intoxicated. On the following day, Landa reported that the "hunters" gathered together. During this time they invoked Zip (the deer protector), who danced with a deer skull and an arrow, while others engaged in letting blood from their ears and tongues.

Returning to Cerén, architectural and spatial evidence suggests that structures 10 and 12 were linked and together were part of a rural village ceremonial system. Interestingly, although the main elite civic-ceremonial core in the Zapotitán Valley is only 5 km away from Cerén, apparently this short distance did not preclude residents

from accessing the supernatural locally. While we do not know how or to what degree activities in structure 10 and 12 were associated, it is conceivable that the ritual practitioner in structure 12 played a role in the timing of community festivals at nearby structure 10 as well as conducting individual consultations.

## Conclusion

In contrast to many of the chapters in this volume, there is limited material evidence of ritual activity occurring within the confines of domestic buildings at the Cerén site. Instead, the archaeological record suggests that household labor and resources allotted to ceremonial behavior was in service to the production of ritual activities that would have incorporated groups larger than the household unit, or even the entire community. We have argued that periodically the household 1 compound was the locus of food grinding likely for community feasts prepared at structure 10. Other lines of evidence also suggest that household 1 members may have had a closer association with ritual activities in structures 10 and 12 than did other households, and they may have interacted in a broader geographical social network as part of their role in ceremonialism (Beaudry-Corbett 2002). Whatever specific roles household 1 members may have played in sponsoring ritual, apparently they were not converted into visible economic gain in terms of architecture, as the buildings occupied by household members were less imposing and decorated, with less energy invested in their construction, when compared to other households excavated to date.

The interpretation that one household at Cerén appeared to have been associated with the production related to extra-household or community ceremonialism raises the question of whether some households engaged in part-time ceremonial specialization in the ancient village. It has been argued that extended social networks created by ceremonial practices, such as feasting or gift giving, and carrying potent social obligations are used for forming alliances beyond the immediate community (Mauss 1990). The extended social networks have been seen as risk-reducing strategies as during times of crisis these extended networks can be accessed to provide critical support to participants (Douglas and Isherwood 1996). Perhaps household 1 members used their apparent role in staging festivals at Cerén to engender similar social relations.

## Note

1. This section is a condensed and updated version of Simmons and Sheets (2002), with additional sources referenced.

