

AN EARLY POSTCLASSIC ROUND STRUCTURE AT CIHUATÁN, EL SALVADOR

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ABSTRACT. Round temples in Mesoamerica have been commonly ascribed to Ehécatl-Quetzalcóatl, the God of Wind and Air, on the basis of conquest period chronicles referring to such buildings. Round structures have been rarely reported on the southeastern frontier of Mesoamerica and none has previously been adequately documented or published. A recently excavated round structure at the Early Postclassic site of Cihuatán in western El Salvador raises questions concerning its possible use. The platform, unfinished at the time Cihuatán was burned and abandoned, could have been intended to be either a temple to Ehécatl or a gladiatorial platform for sacrifices to Xipe Tótec, two Mexican deities whose presence in El Salvador is attested to by archaeological evidence from other sites.

KEYWORDS: round temples, Early Postclassic, Cihuatán, Mesoamerica.

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TÍTULO: Una estructura circular del Posclásico Temprano en Cihuatán, El Salvador.

RESUMEN. Los templos circulares mesoamericanos por lo común se relacionan con el culto a Ehécatl-Quetzalcóatl, el dios del Viento y del Aire, en base a las crónicas coloniales. En la frontera sureste de Mesoamérica apenas se ha documentado o publicado en detalle ninguno de ellos. Aquí informamos sobre nuestra excavación de una plataforma circular en el sitio de Cihuatán, un centro urbano del Posclásico Temprano de El Salvador occidental, que plantea cuestiones sobre su posible uso. La plataforma, sin terminar en el momento de la destrucción y abandono de Cihuatán, podría haber sido un templo dedicado a Ehécatl o una plataforma de gladiadores relacionada con los sacrificios al dios Xipe Tótec, dos deidades mexicanas cuya presencia en El Salvador está confirmada por la evidencia arqueológica de otros sitios.

PALABRAS CLAVE: templos circulares, Posclásico Temprano, Cihuatán, Mesoamerica.

INTRODUCTION

MONUMENTAL ROUND STRUCTURES HAVE GENERALLY been considered somewhat of an anomaly in precolumbian Mesoamerica. In Mexico they are commonly thought to be temples to Quetzalcóatl in his guise as Ehécatl, the God of Winds and Air. H. E. D. Pollock, in his classic 1936 study of round structures in Mesoamerica, documented largely Late Postclassic central Mexican buildings, many of which could be associated with Quetzalcóatl through early colonial descriptions. More recent studies in the Maya area have shown that round structures were much more common than in non-Maya Mexico and existed from the Preclassic onwards (Aimers *et al.* 2000:72), although it is worth noting that the standard methodology of mapping by roughly calculating corners on unexcavated buildings doubtless obscures the true frequency of round or rounded back structures in both Mexico and the Maya region at any time period.

Monumental round structures have rarely been reported south of the core Maya area. In El Salvador Stanley Boggs excavated, but did not publish, a circular platform at Chalchuapa, presumably of Classic Period date, while Pollock (1936:132) repeats E. G. Squier's 1858 description of round structures at the more eastern Salvadoran site of Opico (now known as Tehuacan, near modern San Vicente). The Chalchuapa structure is destroyed and the excavation notes have vanished while all Tehuacan buildings visible today appear to be rectangular. A second round platform was fairly recently discovered at Nuevo Tazumal, adjacent to Chalchuapa. Although it was trenched around its entire periphery, thus destroying its stratigraphic context quite neatly, the top was not excavated or even collected. It is notable, however, that this platform contained in its masonry a cobble engraved with

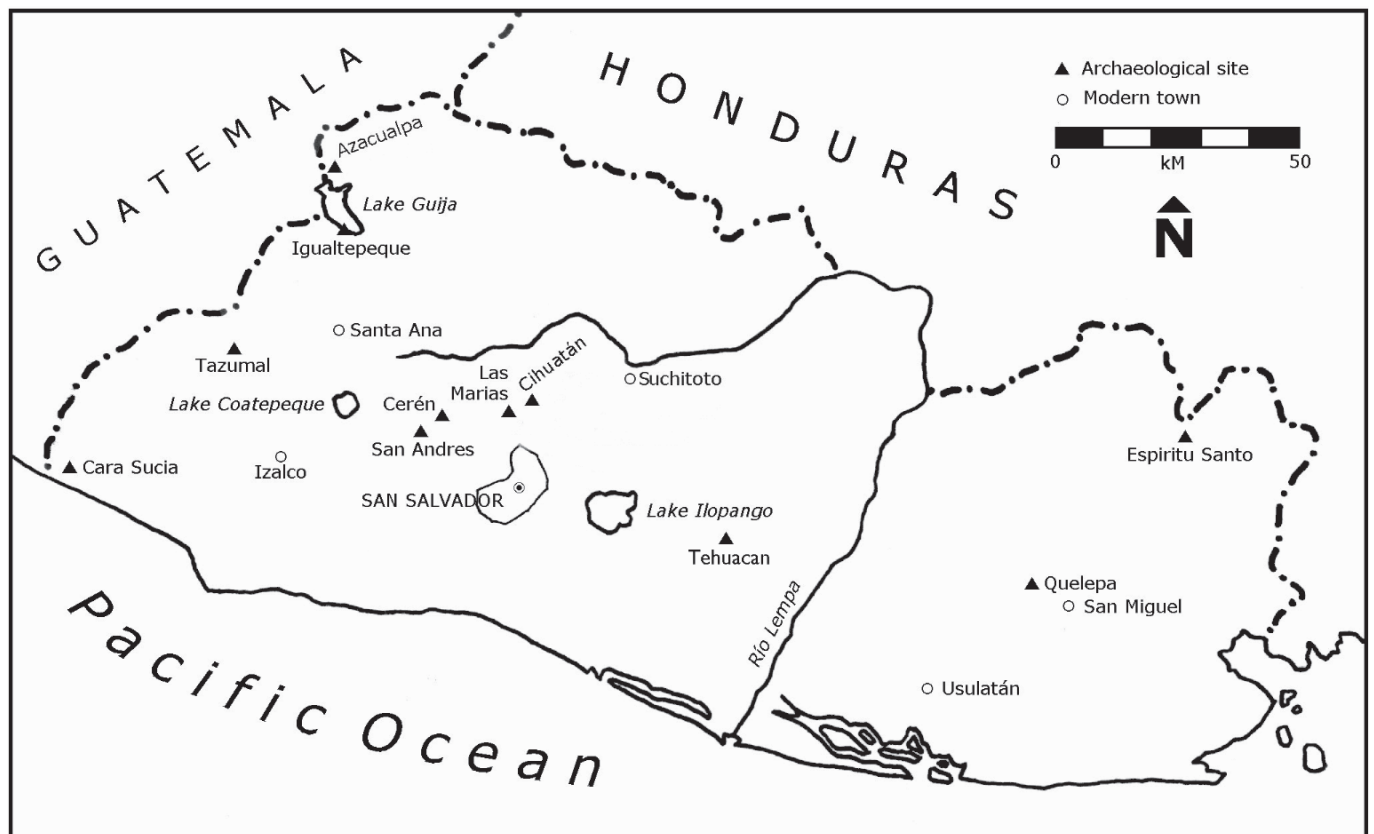


Fig. 1. El Salvador with major Pre-Columbian sites indicated.

the spiral design associated with Xipe Tótec (Valdivieso 2005:21).

In March 2003 the authors were inspecting the southern sector of the Western Ceremonial Center of Cihuatán, a large, urban, Early Postclassic site in north central El Salvador (fig. 1). This area had, for various reasons, been ignored by previous investigations at the site and was usually covered with brush and high grass. In March, at the end of the dry season, most vegetation had burned off and we took the opportunity to see what kinds of structures might be in this sector, knowing that there was an apparent elite residential structure in the southeast corner of the walled ceremonial precinct and that both original entrances to this precinct were on the south side. We did, in fact, locate some eight unreported structures, which we numbered according to the system established by Stanley Boggs. Of these the most important, in terms of size and form, is a round platform, P-28 (fig. 2).

P-28 is located near the wide, ground level entrance to the southwest of the main pyramid, P-7, and the adjacent complex of residential/administrative structures infelicitously labeled the Southeast Patios. Other low platforms of varying sizes and shapes (square to rectangular) are scattered around the ceremonial center and two I-shaped ball courts, one on the west and one in the northeast, complete the ceremonial center (fig. 3). The position of P-28 close to both the main original entrance and to P-7 sug-

gests it was to be an important addition to the civic/ritual complex.

Cihuatán is an urban site, the earliest to be found in El Salvador. Prior to the Early Postclassic, western Salvadoran sites were smallish centers with monumental architecture and a modest resident population, the majority of the (dense) population living in smaller towns and hamlets around the monumental center. The best known of these centers, Tazumal (within modern Chalchuapa) and San Andrés in the Zapotitán Valley, clearly show this older, non-urban pattern (cf. Boggs 1944a and b, 1945, 1950; Sharer 1978).

Cihuatán was founded on a previously unoccupied low volcanic ridge in the middle of the lower Acelhuate Valley, some 34 km north of San Salvador. Here two distinct groups of monumental architecture occupy the two highest points of the ridge. They are surrounded by dense residential architecture and a series of smaller satellite centers, perhaps suburban temples or civic buildings. The urban area is approximately 1.4 x 2.5 km east-west and north-south (Amaroli and Amador 2003). The Western Ceremonial Center, the best known sector of the site, is a large, walled enclosure containing numbers of non-domestic buildings, plus what may have been an elite residence or palace, which was trenched in the late 1970s but remains unpublished (Fowler 1981 and fig. 3). To the east of this precinct is a hill, the Acropolis, which is



Fig. 2. P-28 during excavation. The round shape is clear, but the platform had been used (by park workmen) to throw loose rocks upon, resulting in a loose pile of unassociated stone covering part of the platform.

covered with an enormous elite residential/religious/governmental complex. The Acropolis is currently under excavation and will be the subject of a later publication.

Cihuatán, especially the Western Ceremonial Center, has been the site of various, mostly ill documented, investigations from the late 1920s onwards and the site has been a national monument since 1974. It was inaugurated as a national archaeological park in 2007, under the auspices of FUNDAR. Cihuatán has given its name to the dominant cultural tradition of western El Salvador in the Early Postclassic, the Mexican influenced Cihuatán Phase (Haberland 1960, Amaroli and Bruhns n.d.)

CONSTRUCTION OF P-28

P-28 shows both the common constructional features of Cihuatán and some unique ones.¹ P-28 was built on a paving of pumice cobbles laid in clay (fig. 4). This

Fig. 3. The Western Ceremonial Center of Cihuatán, indicating the relative placement of major structures mentioned in the text.

paving is unusual, if not unique, among structures both at Cihuatán and at related Cihuatán Phase sites. The paving might have been built as a substrate for P-28 as this area of the ceremonial center tends to be damp, even swampy, during the rainy season. The pumice sub-pavement is somewhat larger than the platform and runs for a number of meters under the blocks of vesicular black lava which formed the pavement of much of the main plaza. Neither the pumice nor the black lava of the upper pavement is native to the Cihuatán ridge.

Upon the pumice paving a circle of large stones gathered from the ridge was placed. As with house platforms

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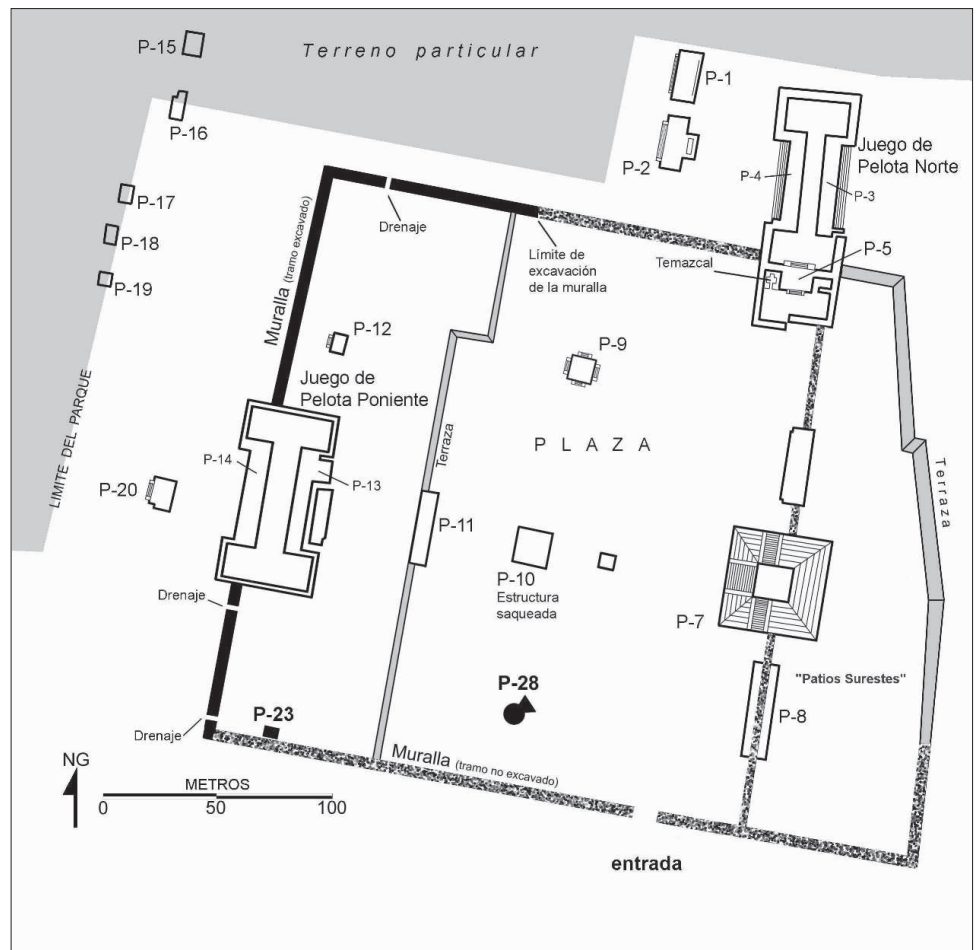




Fig. 4. P-28 looking west. The large, fan shaped entrance and well preserved containment walls are clearly visible, as is the white pumice cobble underlayment of the structure.

fragments of Tohil Plumbate pottery, the leg of a ceramic feline statuette, a few broken bits of obsidian blade, and a number of fragments of the solid clay objects generally called *almenas*,² although their actual function is not known (figs. 7-8).

The debris within the fill is typical of materials found associated with other excavated structures at Cihuatán, although there is far less material than would normally be found associated with either a domestic or an administrative/religious structure (cf. Bruhns

and other ceremonial structures at Cihuatán, the stones were only slightly worked, mainly to provide a flat or flattish outer face. This first circle of stones was chinked with smaller stones, including some bits of pumice. The black lava blocks of the paving around the structure were lined up against the stones, also upon the pumice. The diameter of the first circle is approximately 8.90 m north-south and 7.94 m east-west. Stepped back some 60 cm a second stage, similar to the first, was laid down on top of the wide first stage. Then a well-built wall was constructed on the interior of the stone circles. This wall was also built with lightly worked, carefully selected, natural stones. The wall is broken on the east and west by openings which are 2.38 and 2.37 m wide respectively, creating two equally sized semicircular segments (fig. 5).

The wall being constructed, large unworked stones, ranging from those which would have taken several men to move (judging from our own workmen moving them) to small cobbles were thrown, along with dirt, into the walled area. This fill was irregular, apparently it was simply dumped into the open area formed by the walls along with some dirt (fig. 6). The fill contains a small amount of debris: some undecorated ceramic sherds and

1980a, Kelley 1988, Amaroli *et al.* n.d. [2003], and Lubensky 2005). We postulate that the debris was thrown into the fill as a convenience, having been removed from near P-28 during cleaning activities in the ceremonial center and/or representing debris from meals or other activities of the workers. Organic preservation is such at Cihuatán that little besides pottery and stone survives, although several bits of (unidentifiable) calcined bone were also found in the fill of P-28, again, perhaps, the remains of meals.

The structure was meant to have two entrances, one on the east (orientation 74° mag.) and one on the west. The eastern entrance, which is roughly oriented towards



Fig. 5. View of P-28 from north, showing the large, slightly worked, stones forming the containment wall.



Fig. 6. Workmen moving some of the enormous rocks that constituted part of the fill of P-28.

the main pyramid, is a large fan-shaped structure of cobbles reaching, in its current state, to the second stage of the platform (fig. 9). The fan, which may have been intended to form the base for a projecting stair with balustrades (seen in some other structures at Cihuatán), is approximately 3.78 m in length and 7.66 m wide on its eastern end. Where it abuts the structure and is narrowest it is 5.68 m wide. We postulate that this fan was the foundation for a large stair to the entrance in the wall at the top of the platform or simply to the top of the platform.

The western entrance is an opening in the containment wall, carefully finished and with an interior step. It looks much as if it was going to be an inset stair giving access to the top of the platform or, perhaps, to whatever structure was planned for the top.

However, all of this is speculation, as P-28 was never finished. The fill reaches to near the top of the double stepped containment walls (approximately 1 m), but there is no evidence of its having been completed, a floor having been constructed, nor of any superstructure having been started. Like every other structure excavated at Cihuatán, P-28 shows signs of having been burned.

Scorched pumice and clay were prominent in the upper levels of the excavations and several obsidian projectile points found associated with the platform may be the remnants of the arms of either the invaders or the defenders (fig. 10). We do not know the specifics of how Cihuatán met its end, save that within a century or so of its founding there was an immense conflagration which destroyed the entire urban area and led to its immediate, and permanent, abandonment. This conflagration, according to recent 14C dates, was at approximately A.D. 1030-1050 (Amaroli and Bruhns n.d.).

The Early Postclassic was an unsettled period and an attack from neighbors, from in-migrating peoples looking for a home, or from a dissident faction within the city itself are all possible. The unfinished state of P-28 may indicate that the attack was unsuspected, or relatively so (we cannot, of course, know if the builders left their work some days or weeks before the final day in order to defend themselves). The West Ball Court was similarly unfinished at the time of burning and rapid abandonment of Cihuatán, which argues against any major movement of labor to military ends much before the end of the city.



Fig. 7. Tohil Plumbate and local ceramic sherds *in situ*.

temple and many other Late Classic or Epiclassic round structures in Yucatan, Belize, and Guatemala have, perhaps, been too hastily identified as Wind God temples.³

Western El Salvador was largely occupied by Maya in the Classic Period and sites such as Tazumal and Joya de Cerén have been unquestioningly identified as ethnically Maya. Moreover, Maya speaking peoples still lived close to Cihuatán through the 18th century (Thompson 1970, Campbell 1975). In addition, the immediate region of Cihuatán contains the remains of numbers of Maya affiliated sites.

One of these, Zacotonal (also known as San Francisco), is actually part of a satellite of Cihuatán, indicating that, in some cases at least, the Classic-Early Postclassic transition involved a movement of the site center no more than several hundred meters.

There are indications that, while much of elite and ritual culture had become heavily influenced by the international culture of Postclassic Mesoamerica, the bulk of the populace remained ethnically unchanged. Figures of Mexican deities, including a rare representation of Quetzalcóatl-Ehécatl, have been found in Cihuatán Phase sites, along with Mazapan figurines, Tohil Plumbate, and Mixteca-Puebla and Nicoya-related polychromes (Bruhns

POSSIBLE FUNCTIONS OF P-28

Since round structures in El Salvador are so poorly known we have no comparative material to help in the identification of this enigmatic structure. Certainly in Late Postclassic central and Gulf Coast Mexico, if not elsewhere, round temples were commonly associated with Ehécatl-Quetzalcóatl. It is also the case that Gulf Coast influence is manifest both at Cihuatán and at earlier sites in El Salvador (cf. Andrews 1971; Boggs 1950, 1972; Casasola 1976-77, Bruhns 1980 *inter alia*). However, not all round temples were wind god temples, to judge from the number of round or partly round structures—and their diversity—found in Mexico and the Maya area from the Preclassic onwards. Pollock notes that in the Late Postclassic the chroniclers Motolinia and Torquemada both mention that not all round structures were dedicated to Ehécatl-Quetzalcóatl, but that “other gods” were also worshipped in them (Pollock 1936:32). It is possible that there may not have been such a strong identification of round structures with a specific (Mexican) deity in the Maya area. The well known Caracol, or Observatory, at Chichén Itzá is, of course, a good example of a round structure which probably was not a Wind God



Fig. 8. A fragmentary *almena* recovered from amidst the rock fill of P-28.



Fig. 9. A semi-vertical view at the end of the excavation shows the cleared structure with its large frontal fan. The area of damage on the north side, visible as a sort of trench, is from an iguana hunter. Iguana and armadillo hunters are among the greatest threats to El Salvador's ancient buildings.

n.d.a and b, 1980a and b, 2006; Haberland 1960, 1964, 1989; Stocker 1974, Fowler 1991 *inter alia*). The monumental architectural style of this phase is also closely related to that of the central Mexican Postclassic. On the other hand, much material culture remained the same, including the lack of tortillas in the diet and, in general, the domestic ceramic complex and the styles of houses lived in by the general populace. Nor is there any evidence for general depopulation in western El Salvador at the end of the Epiclassic. On the contrary, one can make a good case for a sudden population increase, perhaps immigrants fleeing the collapsing polities of adjacent Maya regions. It is possible that some of these, especially if they came from the relatively more Mexicanized Maya cultures of, say, highland Guatemala, may have brought the Mexican elements and introduced them to El Salvador.

is not enough excavation-based information to delineate the specifics of the transition from frontier Maya to frontier Mexicanized Maya (or Mayanized Mexicans) in the Early Postclassic. One might add that the transition from the Early Postclassic Cihuatán Phase to the Late Postclassic Nahua-speaking Pipil is even less explored. All we can be sure of is that there was no smooth transition from one cultural/linguistic affiliation to the other. No Cihuatán Phase site known has a Late Postclassic occupation; in every case the Cihuatán Phase is the terminal occupation, even in sites such as San Andrés, where the Cihuatán Phase exists on top of the Classic Maya occupation. All known Cihuatán Phase sites were terminated by fire and permanently abandoned. The area of Cihuatán was still largely abandoned at the time of the Spanish invasions, suggesting that the effects of the events which terminated the city were still being felt.



Fig. 10. One of the numerous pieces, large and small, of burned earth on P-28 and a spear point found within the upper levels of the fill.



Fig. 11. P-28 has now been conserved, a necessary step in a public park with many visitors, and is integrated into the Interpretative Trail. In this view looking east workmen do the final touches of consolidation.

We also cannot be sure of the intended final form of P-28, given its unfinished state at the time of the burning of Cihuatán. As it stands, it appears to have had a large fan shaped entrance, perhaps the base for projecting stairs in the manner of Late Postclassic structures, facing towards the east, but not quite aligned with the main stair of the main pyramid P-7. Pollock (1936:160) remarks that temples to the wind god generally had their entrance facing east as this was the direction associated with *Ehécatl-Quetzalcóatl*. However, P-28 apparently also had a rear entrance, a feature not seen on any of the round buildings illustrated by Pollock or, indeed, seen in the excavated round structures known from Postclassic Mexico. Some sort of entrance on the west was clearly intended, as the semi-circular platform walls have an opening the same width as the narrow upper end of the fan-shaped entrance on the east. The western entrance, however, seems to have been a stair set into the platform. Does this indicate that P-28 was not to be a building, but rather a solid platform? If so, this opens up another very possible function, that of a gladiatorial platform.

Various forms of a gladiatorial sacrifice are known from central Mexico, from Oaxaca and from the Maya area, either from Conquest period documents or from

somewhat earlier art. This sacrifice involved the victim, generally a prisoner of war, being armed with paper or cotton weapons and tied to a stone by a short rope. From this disadvantaged position he fought with a series of fully armed warriors until one of these drew the prisoner's blood. Only then was the prisoner sacrificed, his body flayed, and his skin worn in ritual performances.

In the later Postclassic this sacrifice was associated closely with the cult of *Xipe Tótec*, "Our Lord the Flayed One". *Xipe Tótec* was a very popular deity in Cihuatán Phase El Salvador. Remains of large, often near life-sized, ceramic statues of *Xipe* have been found near Cihuatán (5), in the Chalchuapa zone (2), and near (or in) Lake Güija (2). This is an extraordinary number of statues for such a relatively small area and is unmatched by the relatively rare finds of ceramic *Xipe* statues in México, only one of which can be securely dated to the Early Postclassic (Linné 1942).

There is some question as to when the gladiatorial sacrifice was amalgamated with the *Xipe Tótec* flaying sacrifice. The earliest excavated images of *Xipe Tótec* date to the very Late Classic in both Veracruz (El Zapotal) and Oaxaca (Monte Albán) (Gutiérrez Solana 1977, Caso 1952), while gladiatorial sacrifices may be older. It is

evident that the gladiatorial sacrifice was associated with the cult of Xipe Tótec by the time the *Codex Nuttall* was painted, as a clear representation of this sacrifice being carried out by the famous Mixtec ruler 8 Deer “Feline Claw” is shown on p. 85 (Nuttall 1975).

The Aztec used the gladiatorial sacrifice as a means of political intimidation (Broda de Casas 1970). Given that this was a period of regime changes, warfare, and large scale importation of foreign ideas, a gladiatorial sacrifice platform in Early Postclassic El Salvador makes a certain amount of sense. Known Aztec gladiatorial stones (the stone to which the prisoner was tied) are monolithic carved pieces which were placed upon a platform. However, the Cihuatán Phase had no tradition of large scale stone sculpture, thus constructing a gladiatorial platform in the same manner as other platforms, but making it circular, as were the northern stones, is a distinct possibility. Potential use as a gladiatorial platform would explain P-28’s location close to the main pyramid, the Southeastern Patios, and the main entrance into the walled Western Ceremonial Center. Having two ways to ascend the platform could be related to the need to warriors coming up and leaving during the course of the sacrificial show. It is unfortunate that P-28 was never finished and, as it was left, without the platform fill having been finished, we cannot tell if it was to be a platform without a superstructure or if a possible round temple was to have been constructed upon the circular platform.

CONCLUSIONS

Although we cannot be certain of the specific function of P-28 it tells us that specific building types associated with specific rituals of foreign origin made their way to western El Salvador by the Early Postclassic along with a number of Mexican and Mexican/Mayan deities.

The excavation of P-28 also alerted us to the possibility of other round structures in Cihuatán Phase sites and led us to identify two other round structures at Cihuatán, both significantly different from P-28. One, located within the Western Ceremonial Center to the east of the main pyramid, is on the edge of the steep slope that forms the eastern boundary of the precinct. It appears to be a semi-circular, partly stepped, terrace. Another, to the northwest of the Western Ceremonial Center in a densely built up residential area, is a low platform similar in all but shape to the domestic and low ceremonial platforms that surround it. It is possible that there are other round structures hidden under the high grass, brush, and cultivation that covers much of the site area, although survey, to date, has yet to reveal any. However, much of the site area of Cihuatán remains to be intensively surveyed and map-

ped and one important sector on the western side of the Loma de Cihuatán was illegally bulldozed and its structures destroyed before they could be mapped or otherwise studied. The far south of the site, endangered by the encroachment of clandestine suburban developments, has at least one small ceremonial precinct, although all buildings noted there are rectangular. However, P-28 itself has been preserved by consolidation of the masonry and now forms part of the Interpretative Trail in the Cihuatán Archaeological Park (fig. 11).

On the basis of the structures at Cihuatán, and upon largely anecdotal evidence for elsewhere in El Salvador, we postulate that round structures, shown to have been relatively common in the Preclassic Maya region and, perhaps, more common than generally thought in later epochs, may have continued to be an essential form within the corpus of civic/religious structures in the southeastern most region of the Maya realm. Further investigation may very possibly clarify the purpose(s) of round structures as well as the extent of the Mexicanization of the southeastern frontier of Mesoamerica during the Early Postclassic.

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NOTES

¹ P-28 was not completely intact. In the mid-1960s a looter put a small hole in the center of the platform, apparently looking for a cache or burial. It is evident from the size and depth of the looter's pit that nothing was found. We cleared the pit in our preliminary testing of the structure to look at construction history. A tunnel dug by an iguana (*garrobo*) hunter on the north side likewise damaged the structure slightly.

² *Almenas* are best known from Teotihuacan and a number of Aztec sites in Mexico. Although the Early Classic almenas are solid, rather than hollow, their form is very different from the simple cross shaped almenas of Cihuatán. The Late Postclassic *almenas* are either based on Teotihuacán ones or are hollow and stepped, with a point on top. It is worth noting that central Mexican Postclassic style almenas are also known from Cihuatán, where they are associated with the Acropolis and its palace(s).

³ The question of the function of round structures remains vexing, especially outside of central Mexico. Kowalski and Dunning (1999) unhesitatingly identify a round structure at Uxmal as a wind god temple. Their evidence is that a possible statue of Ehécatl was found elsewhere in the site. Finsten *et al.* (1996) have made a case for low round structures in the Mixtec Sierra of Oaxaca being sweat baths. However, the only sweat bath excavated at Cihuatán is rectangular, with an interior bench and firebox. It forms part of the buildings which make up the North Ball Court. The unmapped and unexcavated round structure outside the Western Ceremonial Center at Cihuatán has no readily visible preserved superstructure nor is there any evidence of a firebox. It is located in an area of mixed domestic and small civic structures. See <www.cihuatán.org> "old news" for illustrations of this structure and of P-28 in more detail.

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