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En este número / In this number:

**Households of the Indigenous K'iche'**  
**Maya at the City of Utatlán**.....1-22  
 Thomas Babcock

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# Households of the Indigenous K'iche' Maya at the City of Utatlán

## Abstract

*The Spaniards conquered the K'iche' Maya political center of Q'umarkaj in 1524. The size and characteristics of the city, also known as Utatlán were explored using a systematic sampling methodology with exposure of structures. The city was found to cover 85 ha and comprised three zones: the epicenter with its temples and palaces, an adjacent elite zone with structures built on raised mounds, and residential area for commoners. A ditch feature separated the elite zone from that of the commoners. Ethnohistoric sources inform us the ruling class was descended from invaders, possibly of Gulf Coastal origin. The commoners were indigenous K'iche' whose language and identification were adopted by the intruders. Excavations in the non-elite zone uncovered houses of a distinct pattern. Structures were placed on an excavated and leveled talpetate surface. House lots had a patio surrounded on up to three sides with structures. Burial pits were found in the patios, often with cremated remains which included children. Houses lacked hearths but ceramic braziers may have been used for cooking and heat. Radiocarbon dating indicated one house was occupied for a thousand years, and another for seven hundred fifty years. These non-elite houses predate the arrival of the ruling class and confirm the status of the indigenous K'iche' as long-time residents of the Quiché basin. Their cultural practices were preserved as they were assimilated into the city of Utatlán.*

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## Resumen

*En 1524 los españoles conquistaron el centro político K'iche' en Q'umarkaj. El tamaño y las características de la ciudad, también conocida como Utatlán se analizaron utilizando una metodología de muestreo sistemático con la exposición de las estructuras. La ciudad fue encontrada para cubrir 85 hectáreas y comprende tres zonas: el epicentro, con sus templos y palacios; una zona de la élite junto con las estructuras construidas sobre montículos; y una zona residencial para los plebeyos. Una zanja separada las zonas de élite de la zona de los comuneros. Las fuentes etnohistóricas nos informan de la clase dominante era descendiente de los invasores, posiblemente desde el Golfo de México. Los plebeyos eran los K'iche' indígenas cuya lengua y la identificación fueron adoptadas por los intrusos. Las excavaciones en la zona plebeyos cubierto casas de un patrón distinto. Las estructuras fueron colocadas en una superficie de talpetate excavada y nivelada. Construcción de viviendas tenía un patio rodeado por un máximo de tres lados con las estructuras. Los entierros fueron encontrados en los patios, a menudo con los restos cremados, que incluyó a niños. Las casas no tenían hogares pero braseros de cerámica haber sido utilizado para cocinar y calentar. La datación por radiocarbono indica una casa fue ocupada durante mil años, y otro para setecientos cincuenta años. Estas casas plebeyos son anteriores a la llegada de la clase dominante y confirman el estatus de los K'iche' indígenas como antiguos residentes de la Cuenca del Quiché. Sus prácticas culturales fueron preservadas, ya que fueron asimilados en la ciudad de Utatlán.*

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## Introduction

The march of Hernando Cortez from the Gulf Coast of Mexico to the Central Valley of Mexico, and the conquest of the Aztec at Tenochtitlán were recorded in great detail by Bernal Díaz del Castillo. The text provides a description of the Aztec capital in such a way that the reader can get a full sense of ancient city (Díaz del Castillo 220-244). We are not so fortunate when it comes to the conquest of Guatemala in 1524 CE, where the letter of Pedro Alvarado to Cortez gives but a

scant couple of pages to the description of the K'iche' capital at Utatlán (Alvarado 60-61) and then only in describing his response to a fear of being trapped within the city. Perhaps this was because the major battles in the conquest and control of Guatemala took place elsewhere. Early colonial rule by the Spanish conquerors was from Villa de Santiago, a site nearer the Kakchiquel capital of Iximché (Alvarado 86). What we know about the Utatlán comes to us from native accounts of the history of the K'iche' and their rise to power in Guatemala written during the early colonial period. These are commonly referred to as “ethnohistoric” resources. The Mayan cultures prior to the conquest were literate societies. From Mexico we have codices, texts painted on folding books of bark paper. These were presumed to have existed in Guatemala at the time of the Spanish conquest but none survived (Carmack, *Quichean Civilization* 12-13). We can understand pre-Hispanic K'iche'an society, in part, based on careful interpretation of what can be read in native sources that date to the very early colonial period. These are the *Popol Wuj* (Christenson, Edmonson, Recinos et al.), *The Annals of the Cakchiquels* (Recinos and Goetz), and other native sources (Carmack, *Ethnohistory*; Recinos). From these ethnohistoric resources we can infer the nature of the indigenous social and political organization. But they do not inform us about the organization or spatial arrangement of the city.

There has been active scholarly interest in the K'iche' area, exploring both ethnohistory (Carmack, *Quichean Civilization*, “Ethnohistory”, *The Quiché Mayas*) and archaeology (Fox; Weeks, “Evidence of Metalworking”, *Dimensions of Social Interaction*). The work continues to the present day (Macario, “The Inhabitants”, “Sociopolitical Configuration”). An important area of investigation involves the exploration of the capital of the ancient K'iche' referred to above as *Utatlán* but known in the indigenous language as *Q'umarkaj*. This terminology can be confusing; therefore I will use *Utatlán* to refer to the city with its residence zone and *Q'umarkaj* to refer to the political epicenter. Robert Carmack and his colleagues from the State University of New York at Albany worked extensively in the Quiche Basin during the 1970s. The early phases of their work included survey of the plateaus in the vicinity of *Q'umarkaj*. This led to the hypothesis that the city of *Utatlán* might comprise three political centers (Pismachi of the Tamub', Chisalin of the Ilocab', and *Q'umarkaj* of the Nima K'iche') with the population spread out in a contiguous manner on the plateaus connecting these centers (Wallace 40). This is illustrated in Figure 1.



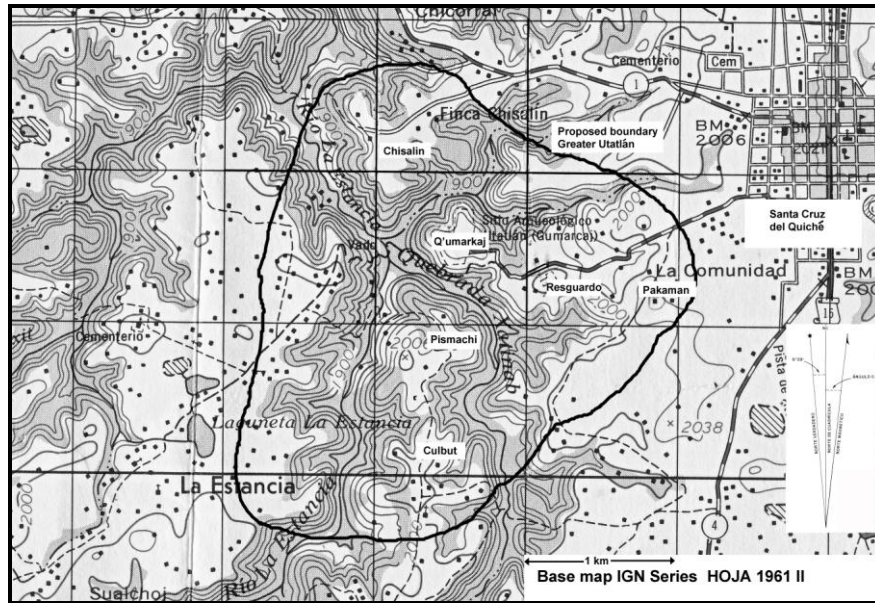


Figure 1. Hypothetical area of Utatlán residence zone

The ethnohistoric sources describe a group of Gulf Coastal Maya warlords, heavily influenced by the Nahua or Toltecs, migrating to the highlands of Guatemala, and eventually ruling over the indigenous population. These intruders arrived without wives. They intermarried with the local population, eventually adopting their K'iche' Mayan language (Carmack, *The Quiché Mayas* 51, Edmonson 215, Fox 280-281). The archaeological evidence from Q'umarkaj can be argued to support this reconstruction of events. The organization of palaces and plazas at Q'umarkaj fits well with the identified lineages and their interrelationships as described in the *Popol Wuj* (Carmack, *The Quiché Mayas*). The date of migration to the Quiche Basin, the origin and identity of the intruders, and the date of the founding of Q'umarkaj remain matters of contention (Brown 279-281; Van Akkeren 14; Sachse and Christenson 25-28) but Carmack places the migration around 1200 CE and 1400 CE for the founding of Q'umarkaj (Carmack, *The Quiché Mayas* 44-50).

The architectural features at the epicenter of Q'umarkaj and those on the adjacent plateau near Resguardo share platform design and construction techniques (Macario, "Inhabitants" 10-11; Weeks "Evidence of Metalworking" 56-60, Wallace 27-35) though there are differences between the two areas, as well. The palaces and temples at Q'umarkaj were built on a much grander scale than the mound complexes near *Resguardo* (Figure 2). However in both areas we observed structures on elevated terraces, buildings surrounding interior patios, painted plaster and sloping (*talud*) construction, and groups of mounds placed in proximity to neighboring groups of

structures. These characteristics support a partial reconstruction of the social hierarchy of the K'iche' with the ruling elite lineages congregated at the epicenter, and a lower status, yet still elite, group nearby. This does not, however, inform us about the indigenous population that may have resided on the surrounding plateaus. Non-elite houses near Q'umarkaj may be a useful aid for interpretation of the relationship of invading warriors with the native inhabitants of the Quiche Basin.



**Figure 2.** Author's son, Gregory Babcock, looking across ball court to main plaza of Q'umarkaj, July 2010

The development of Mayan languages and dialects has been interpreted to place the K'iche'an group in eastern and southern Guatemala after 1200 CE (Campbell and Kaufman 192; see also Diebold). The K'iche'an dialects were separated by 900 to 1000 CE (Braswell 300). Radiocarbon dating from non-elite houses at Utatlán may provide evidence for understanding of the location and timing for development of K'iche'an dialects.

I was tasked with examining the residence zone adjacent to Q'umarkaj, to test the hypothesis of a more or less contiguous 4 km<sup>2</sup> area of occupation. This work was carried out under the direction of Kenneth Brown of the University of Houston, and was financed through a grant from the National Science Foundation (NSF-320-0803A). The National Geographic Society supported the photographic documentation of the work (NGS 77-356). During the course of testing, several non-elite residences were uncovered and these will be the focus of this discussion. I will describe their characteristics and their potential significance for our understanding of the pre-

conquest social and political developments in the Quiche Basin. These non-elite houses may have importance beyond merely providing a description of house characteristic of Highland Guatemala.

As we pursue this study, it might be useful to bear in mind that a community may be a heterogeneous (multi-ethnic) construct, but ethnographic studies of Mayan towns or villages have tended to focus on homogeneity, with the subjects considered representative of “Mayanness” of the population. This is so even though the Mayanness of the people of interest has been defined by contrasting the Maya to the politically and economically dominant co-resident Ladino culture (Hervik and Kahn 210-218). The ethnohistoric sources suggest a similarly complex situation for Utatlán, with a dominant K'iche' leadership of foreign origin yet paradoxically named after the indigenous subordinate population.

### **Methodological Considerations**

Utatlán (also called *Greater Utatlán*) was thought by Wallace (40) to cover 4 km<sup>2</sup>. The hypothesis of a contiguous population was tested using a systematic or patterned sampling of the plateaus extending out from Q'umarkaj and Chisalin, with excavations expanded when architectural features were encountered. Natural features, such as constrictions or narrowing between plateau segments, isolation of areas by barrancas, and location with respect to hilltop complexes (Resguardo, Pakaman) were used to define the component subareas of the proposed residence zone. Each subarea was tested with regularly spaced excavation units. The findings from these were compared using analysis of variance techniques. The overall sampling design is referred to as a systematic sample strategy and is considered an unbiased approach to the examination of the spatial distribution of features and cultural remains within a defined geographical space (Shennan 380, Orton 22). In one area, four non-elite house structures were extensively exposed. These were in the midst of spaced test pits that did not encounter structures; therefore the data from the features were kept separate from those of the spaced test pits to avoid introducing bias that would invalidate an analysis of variance.

The K'iche' came to dominate Highland Guatemala during the Protohistoric period, the three centuries before the conquest (Wauchope 241). It was thought Q'umarkaj was established in approximately 1400 CE when the Nima K'iche' relocated to the plateau from their earlier political center at Pismachi. This was nearly 200 years after their arrival in the highlands from the Gulf Coast of Mexico. Alvarado conquered the area for Spain in 1524 CE and within three to four decades of his arrival the population was relocated to Santa Cruz del Quiché (Carmack, *The*

*Quiché Mayas* 307-311). Temporal control for recovered materials was based on the assumption that Protohistoric materials related to the final occupation of the plateaus prior to the Spanish conquest would be superficially distributed over the area, and would be stratigraphically separated from earlier materials. Actual house sites would have been swept clean during use. Following abandonment the refuse scattered about outside these houses would be redistributed across the landscape via normal human activities (agriculture) and natural forces (weather). These processes and their implications for examining prehistoric houses have been described elsewhere (Johnston and Gonlin).

Previous work at Q'umarkaj suggested three phases of construction (Wauchope 61-62) but these were all within the Protohistoric period. The city was thought to be occupied for approximately 150 years. The occupants of an area, such as a city or town, use things and discard trash. During their use of the area, debris accumulates over the surface (Johnston and Gonlin). The number of people that occupy an area, or the length of time they are there determine the amount of debris that accumulates at an archaeological site. I would call this the "intensity of occupation." The data relevant to the interpretation of the residence zone needed to represent the appropriate time horizon so materials that were not consistent with the Protohistoric period were excluded. It was thought concentration of artifacts in midden deposits could bias the sample so these were excluded from statistical analysis. Also, debris deposited during the construction of raised mounds, or found beneath architectural features would predate the occupation of the feature, so these, too, were excluded. The purpose was, in part, to define the spatial extent of the city at the time of the Spanish conquest, therefore our interest was in the superficial materials that would provide a sample representative of the final occupation of this site.

As this was an unbiased systematic sampling of the individual plateaus, the quantity of materials in the superficial Protohistoric deposits could be used to characterize the relative intensity of human habitation in each subarea of the proposed residence zone. In addition, specific characteristics of the artifact assemblages might provide data relative to social status, craft specialization, ritual activity, and domestic functions. This information might permit differentiation of areas within the residence zone. Quantitative dissimilarities in the amount of artifacts recovered could be evidence of discontinuity or interruption in the spatial arrangement—the 4 km<sup>2</sup> did not represent a single city. The entire 4 km<sup>2</sup> area could not be assessed, but any discontinuities in artifact concentrations would be sufficient evidence to refute the hypothesis of contiguous occupation. Qualitative differences in artifact assemblages could aid interpretation of the social hierarchy and functional complexity within the city. The unbiased sampling of subareas within the



proposed residence zone, keeping materials from the different areas separate permits use of statistical tools such as analysis of variance techniques (Croxtton et al. 605-610, Hughes and Grawoig 414-415) to test the hypothesis that there was relative uniformity in density of Protohistoric occupation (Wallace 40) .

## Results

The primary analysis will be presented in detail elsewhere (Babcock). The analysis of variance indicated that the density of occupation was not uniform, and pair-wise comparison of the subareas suggested that Uxatlán, the city of the Nima K'iche, was separated from Pismachi and Chisalin. The city of Uxatlán is illustrated in Figure 3 and encompasses approximately 85 ha. It had three major zones defined by relative status of the residents in the social hierarchy. In addition there were three identifiable features outside the ceremonial complex at Q'umarkaj that served as an axis to tie the community together. These features include *Pakaman*, *Resguardo*, and a mound situated atop a burial complex. *Pakaman*, a complex of structures with a temple, plaza, and palace, may have been associated with the defensive perimeter of Uxatlán (Carmack *The Quiché Mayas* 152-153, Fox 1978). *Resguardo*, atop a small hill just east of Q'umarkaj, had two temples, a palace, and a ball court, and is thought to be associated with the *Nihaib'* lineage identified in ethnohistoric documents, one of the principal lineages of the K'iche' at Q'umarkaj (Carmack *The Quiché Mayas* 244, Fox 29, 38). Midway between these locations, on the line or axis that ties them to the ceremonial plaza of Q'umarkaj, was a mound on the side of a hill. This mound was placed above a royal tomb containing two cremations accompanied by grave goods including artifacts of gold, jade, silver, and turquoise. It should be noted that, unlike royal burials at Classic period Maya sites, these tombs were not isolated chambers within a pyramidal structure, but rather were associated with a small, free-standing rectangular feature that was exposed and weathered prior to the construction of the overlying mound.



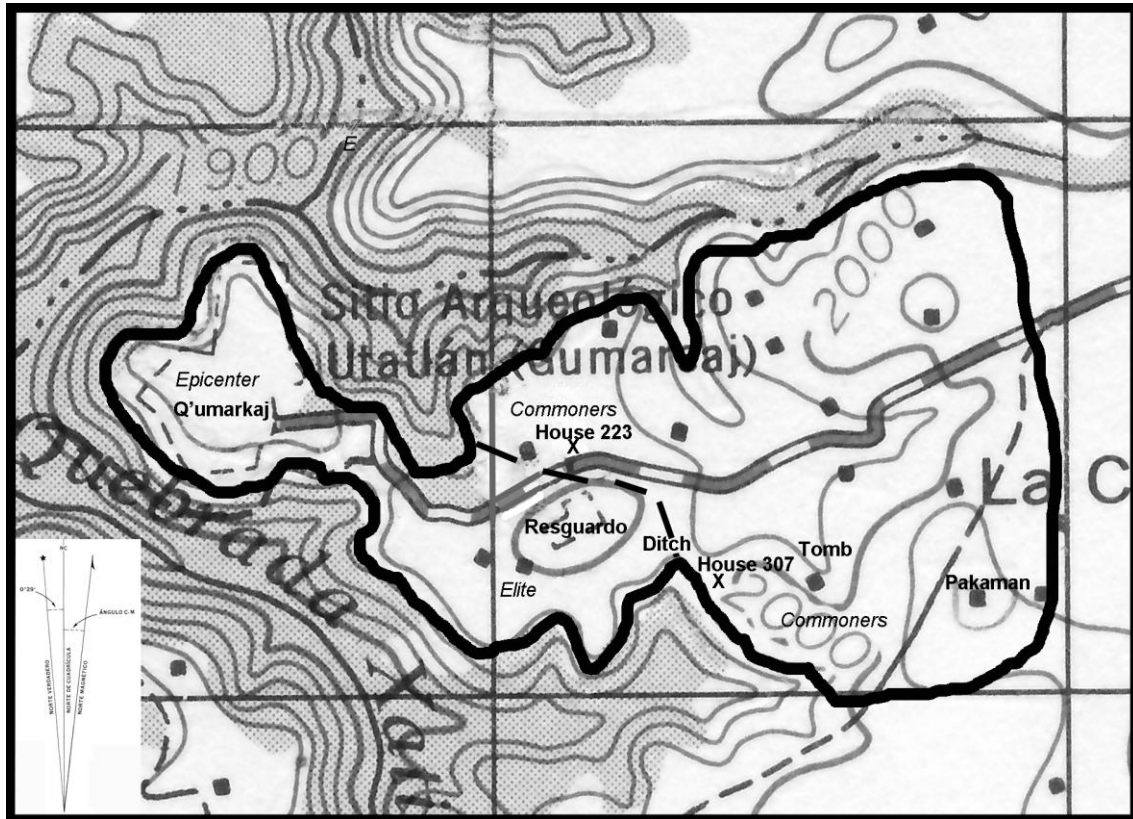


Figure 3. Community of Utatlán, base map IGN series HOJA 1961 II

Q'umarkaj had the principal temples and plazas, and the palaces and council houses of the K'iche' elite lineages. It was at the western end of the city. Its structures have been more fully described by Wallace (31-34) and Macario ("Inhabitants" 7-11, "Sociopolitical Configuration" 29-31). East of Q'umarkaj is the area of *Resguardo* and on the flat plateau adjacent to this hilltop feature we found elite houses and structures on raised platforms surrounding patios, but no palaces were identified. *Resguardo* was separated from Pakaman by a ridge. This ridge was bounded on the south by a steep *barranca*, and sloped down to the north before rising again to another steep *barranca*. Except for feature above the tomb, this ridge lacked platforms or mounds. The ridge was separated from the *Resguardo* area by a ditch, only partially preserved, but which probably transected the plateau north to south. This may have also served as a roadway crossing the plateau and entering the *barrancas* on either side to continue on the Pismachi and Chisalin. The city had a tripartite pattern. There were two levels of elite strata, one at Q'umarkaj, and the other below *Resguardo*. These were separated from the non-elite area by the ditch. This pattern is replicated at

Iximché (Nance et al 312-314; Maudslay 37). The tomb is wholly within the non-elite area. Its apparent purposeful but unusual placement on the slope of a hill and in alignment with Pakaman, *Resguardo*, and Q'umarkaj served as a keystone to support the argument that city illustrated in Figure 3 was, indeed, the community associated with the K'iche' capital.

We uncovered four non-elite houselots in the area between Pakaman and the ditch separating the ridge from the *Resguardo* area. These four structures shared traits we did not find elsewhere at the site. No non-elite houses lacking these characteristics were found on the ridge. Based on these characteristics I propose a hypothetical description of the “typical” commoner house of the K'iche'. The houses were identified as non-elite based on a ceramic inventory low in decorative wares in comparison to the *Resguardo* area. The absence of painted plaster at the four houses is further support for their non-elite status. They were judged as residential based on the presence of *comales* and *colander* sherds, and *manos* and *metates*, items associated with food preparation. These four were not built on raised platform mounds as were the features encountered near *Resguardo* or at Pakaman, and those described for Q'umarkaj (Macario “Inhabitants” 31-34, “Sociopolitical Configuration” 3-25, Wallace 27-35). Instead, each was placed on a prepared *talpetate* surface.

*Talpetate* is not a specific geological term or rock type but rather is volcanic ash welded together through the action of calcium carbonates and ground water (Webster's Third New International dictionary). *Talpetate* is the consolidated volcanic ash that serves as a bedrock formation for the terraces in this part of the Quiche Basin and it can be found exposed near the edges of the plateaus and in the vertical walls of the *barrancas*. It underlies the loamy clay of the modern *milpas*. The present day houses in the vicinity of the Utatlán ruins, however, are placed on the loamy clay surface, not on *talpetate*.

The houses were each constructed after the overlying soils had been removed and the natural undulating contour of the *talpetate* was leveled to provide a suitable surface for placing a structure. This leveling was required because of the natural slope of the plateau as well as the irregular or uneven characteristic of *talpetate* on the ridge top. The process naturally created a vertical *talpetate* wall as a boundary on the upslope side which would demarcate one side of the houselot. In the other direction, the *talpetate* would naturally continue down the slope. In one case a stone wall was found on top of the *talpetate* ledge, apparently to further marking the property boundary, though it could also have been placed subsequently not as a boundary but rather to prevent one from accidentally stepping off. The residence structure was placed on the downslope

side of the prepared surface so as to leave an open area or patio between the house and the *talpetate* wall.

This pattern of house construction has been reported elsewhere in the highlands. The natives in the Verapaz area constructed residences on terraces cut into the hillside (Adams 6). Such terraces have also been identified at several archaeological sites in the Guatemala Highlands, with thirty-nine mapped at Cahyup (Smith, fig. 98) and 400 at Chuitinamit (Smith, 49, fig. 109), both in Baja Verapaz. In the Quiché area terraces of this type were found at Chutixtiox, (Smith, fig. 60), Comitancillo (Smith, fig. 67), and Tzicuay (Smith, fig. 86).

This construction technique means that the living surface was on what would otherwise be considered bedrock. In such a situation there cannot be stratigraphic separation of occupation levels as is found where mound features are rebuilt to higher levels covering intact earlier levels. At Q'umarkaj and in the *Resguardo* area, as well as at Pakaman, we are able to see distinct construction phases. We can identify mound fill used to build up the platform. We can identify earlier underlying occupation levels predating the Protohistoric founding of Q'umarkaj (Macario "Inhabitants", "Sociopolitical Configuration", Wauchope 61-62).

Johnston and Gonlin (59-161) described how house floors and living surfaces are kept clean during occupation. Debris is not permitted to accumulate on the floor though sharp materials such as pottery sherds or obsidian, and organic food refuse would not be expected in an occupied house. Johnston and Gonlin based their article on behaviors observed in modern Maya households. Materials are strewn about (disposed of) outside the household perimeter or taken farther out and deposited in a midden. Following abandonment of a house, natural processes (weather, human activity) disturb previously discarded trash. Materials discarded during occupation by being strewn or scattered about near the residence can then be redeposited and some of the debris can end up close to the house or atop the structure remnants (Johnston and Gonlin 159-161).

The houselots shared additional features. The architectural components were poorly preserved but appeared to have at least a lower course of pumice blocks marking their outline. We did not find any preserved post holes, but the walls that were present were rarely more than a single course of stones in height. The stones used for construction at Q'umarkaj, Pakaman, and near Resguardo were often removed for use elsewhere. Pakaman provided direct evidence for this practice. Painted plaster that was removed from blocks of stone was placed in structural fill, and plaster floors were observed to curve up at their edges as if to continue onto an area of missing walls. During the early colonial period the residents of Utatlán were relocated to Santa Cruz del Quiché and the local people relate stories that the church and civic buildings were built from blocks

of stone removed from the ancient structures. It is possible that the non-elite houses were constructed of stone, as is suggested by the presence of some stone blocks. Modern houses in the vicinity of Q'umarkaj use adobe bricks and this material may also have been used in antiquity.

The houselots had a patio area between the main structure and the talpetate ledge. The patio could be bordered by structures on two or three sides in a U-shaped or L-shaped arrangement. The larger structure, which I presume to be the actual house, was opposite the ledge, and may have had one or two smaller flanking structures. In one houselot the secondary structure was linearly arranged with the primary house. Two of the secondary structures were identifiable as *temascales* or sweat baths, a feature type previously identified in the Maya Highlands (Ichon 203-209). The *temascales* had floor drainages. In one of these the drain led to a subfloor *pila* (possibly for water storage). In the other it led to a covered subfloor drain that ran between the *temascal* and house. The subfloor drain served to direct water out from the patio. The *temascales* had internal configurations of low, parallel stone walls with fill material between, which may represent benches for seating. Oxidized stains on the talpetate surfaces were observed within or adjacent to the structures, and these reddened areas are thought to represent exposure to heat sources.

The patio area of each houselot had pits excavated in the talpetate. Many of the pits contained human remains, all but one as cremations. The cremations included those of infants and children. Some of the pits that lacked bone did have materials consistent with grave offerings. An alternative interpretation could be these were dedicatory offerings (Lucero 144-153), but their location clustered in patios rather than in cardinal directions would suggest this was not the case. We should also be cautious about concluding anything based on the absence of bone. Gordon and Buikstra (566-571) reported that the dissolution of bone in soil is inversely correlated with the soil pH ( $r = -0.92$ ). Nielson-Marsh et al. (446) note that the rate of osseous dissolution, a process known as diagenesis, is related to the soil pH, soil saturation with  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  and  $\text{PO}_4^{3-}$  ions, and the rate of groundwater movement. These processes could lead to the complete disappearance of identifiable bone or human remains.

Charcoal samples from two burials were analyzed at the *Balcones Research Center* radiocarbon laboratory at the University of Texas at Austin. Each dated to the Classic period [House 223 Tx-3825 at 530 CE  $\pm$  50 years and House 307 Tx-3820 at 880 CE  $\pm$  50 years] (Valastro et al. 1196-1197). The cultural materials recovered during excavation were similar to those found elsewhere in the residential zone, that is, they were Protohistoric. Orange ware predominated, similar to elsewhere in the residence zone. Mica ware, which was found throughout the residential zone excavations, as well as at Q'umarkaj and Chisalin, was present at 4.5% of the



total. One hundred thirty-two decorated sherds were found, of which ninety-six were white on red ware, and thirty were polychrome. These were similar to sherds found in other Protohistoric deposits. Only six were red on white sherds, similar to those associated with Classic period deposits in the residence zone, and none had incised decorative motifs. The radiocarbon dates could be interpreted to mean these structures were not occupied during the Protohistoric period, but the failure to encounter other residential features in the vicinity to account for the ceramic inventory, and the general absence of earlier ceramics lead me to conclude these four houses were, indeed, contemporaneous with the K'iche' center of Q'umarkaj.

The common features of the non-elite houses are as follows:

- 1) All four were on surfaces prepared in the talpetate, essentially bedrock,
- 2) All were on the downslope side of the plateau, with a vertical wall of talpetate on the upslope side that defined the edge of the feature,
- 3) Between the house structure and the talpetate wall was a patio area,
- 4) In three of the four the terrace was prepared such that the areas for houses and flanking features were on a low platform left at a slightly higher level than the patio area. The fourth house was on the same level as the patio,
- 5) Two of the flanking features were *temascales* or sweat baths,
- 6) None of the houses had hearths and all had pottery that included brazier sherds,
- 7) In the patio of each were pits, several of which contained burials.

### House 223

One of the houses, House 223, may have additional significance for understanding of the development of the K'iche' state (Figure 4). Within its patio there was a flexed inhumation with grave goods that included a green obsidian blade. A charcoal sample (Tx-3825) from the base of the burial was dated to 530 CE  $\pm$  50 years (Valastro et al. 1197), a millennium prior to the Spanish conquest. This, in itself, might not be surprising for there were Classic period materials occasionally found in our excavations. It would not seem unusual for a Classic period house site to be reused during the Postclassic or Protohistoric periods. In this house, however, the patio area had a raised *talpetate* remnant that must have been created when the house site was initially prepared. The sculpting required to form the surface requires removal of material that, once removed, cannot be put back. The patio surface can be cut deeper, but the raised remnant cannot be built up. A raised feature can be placed in a patio, but such an artificial construction would be readily

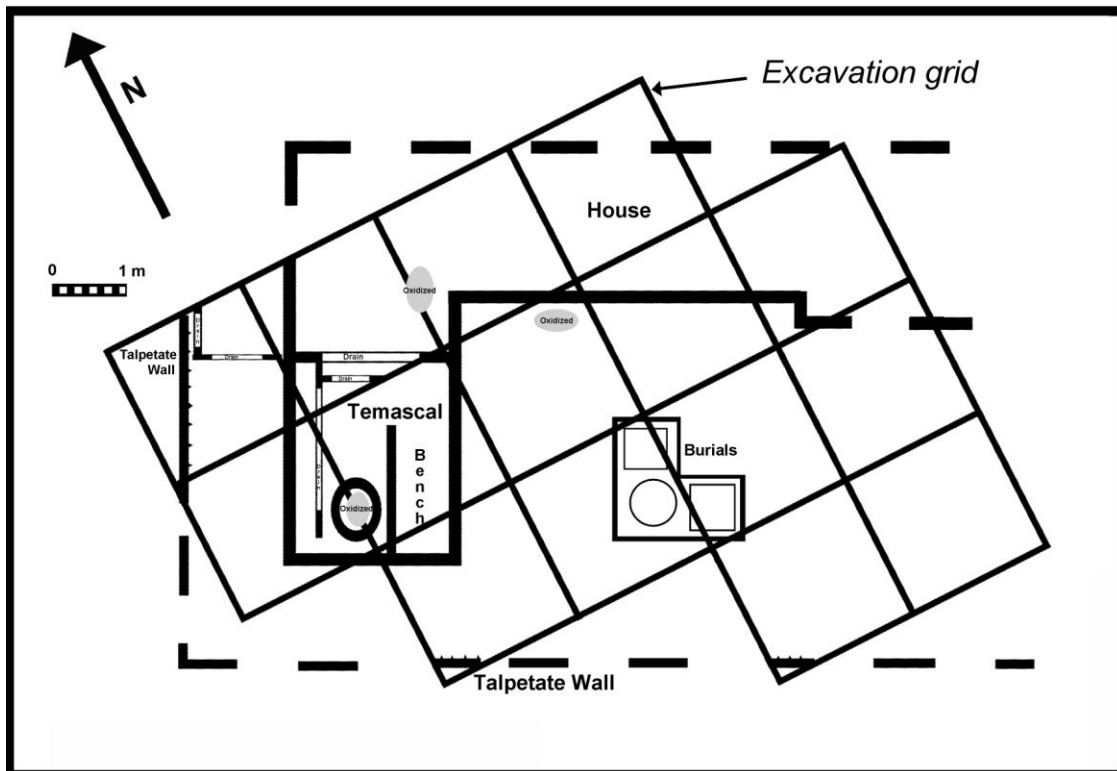
identifiable as different from the underlying surface, that is, it would not be *talpetate*. The three burials at House 223 were placed within this remnant, including the one dated to 530 CE. The terrace, then, has to be at least this old. The raised *talpetate* within the patio would be an inconvenience. One might ask, “If the terrace was reused following abandonment by the original inhabitants, how likely would it be that the new residents would continue to preserve this inconvenient feature?”



**Figure 4.** Overview of House 223, photograph by the author

House 223 demonstrates most of the features that characterize these houselots (Figure 5). It was placed on a *talpetate* ledge with a patio between the ledge and the house platform. The house, itself, was placed on a *talpetate* surface left at a slightly higher level than the patio. Along one side of the patio was a secondary structure, also on raised *talpetate*. Between the two structures there was a drainage channel covered with flat stone slabs. This led from the patio to an area of *talpetate* external to the house which also had drainage channels that continued to direct water toward the *barranca* edge. The secondary structure was a *temascal*, with a raised surface showing signs of heat oxidation. Its floor also had drainage channels, and there was a bench (sitting surface) for those using the *temascal*. In this houselot, but not the others, the burials were in a

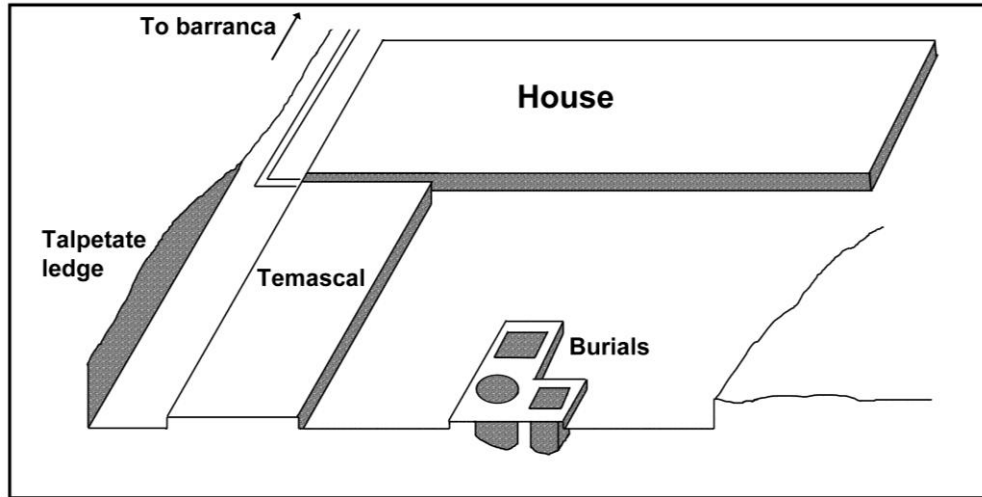
raised L-shaped block of *talpetate* left in place during the terrace preparation. The very construction of the terrace on which the houselot sat required the surface to be sculpted and leveled, with remnant elevated surfaces being part of the original configuration. It would be possible to later remove the L-shaped feature, but it could not have been formed at a later time.



**Figure 5.** Schematic drawing of House 223 and excavation grid

Figure 6 is a schematic cut-away drawing of the house and *temascal* platforms, the patio, and the burial features. It illustrates the way the terrace was prepared for placement of the house. All of the illustrated surfaces must date to the original construction, or they were cut deeper into the original *talpetate* during subsequent modifications. The burials are an impediment to free access and use of the patio. If the residents during the Protohistoric period lacked any tie or link to the original occupants, one might think they would remove such an impediment. On the other hand,

it the Protohistoric users did have a relationship to those who created the feature, they might preserve it.

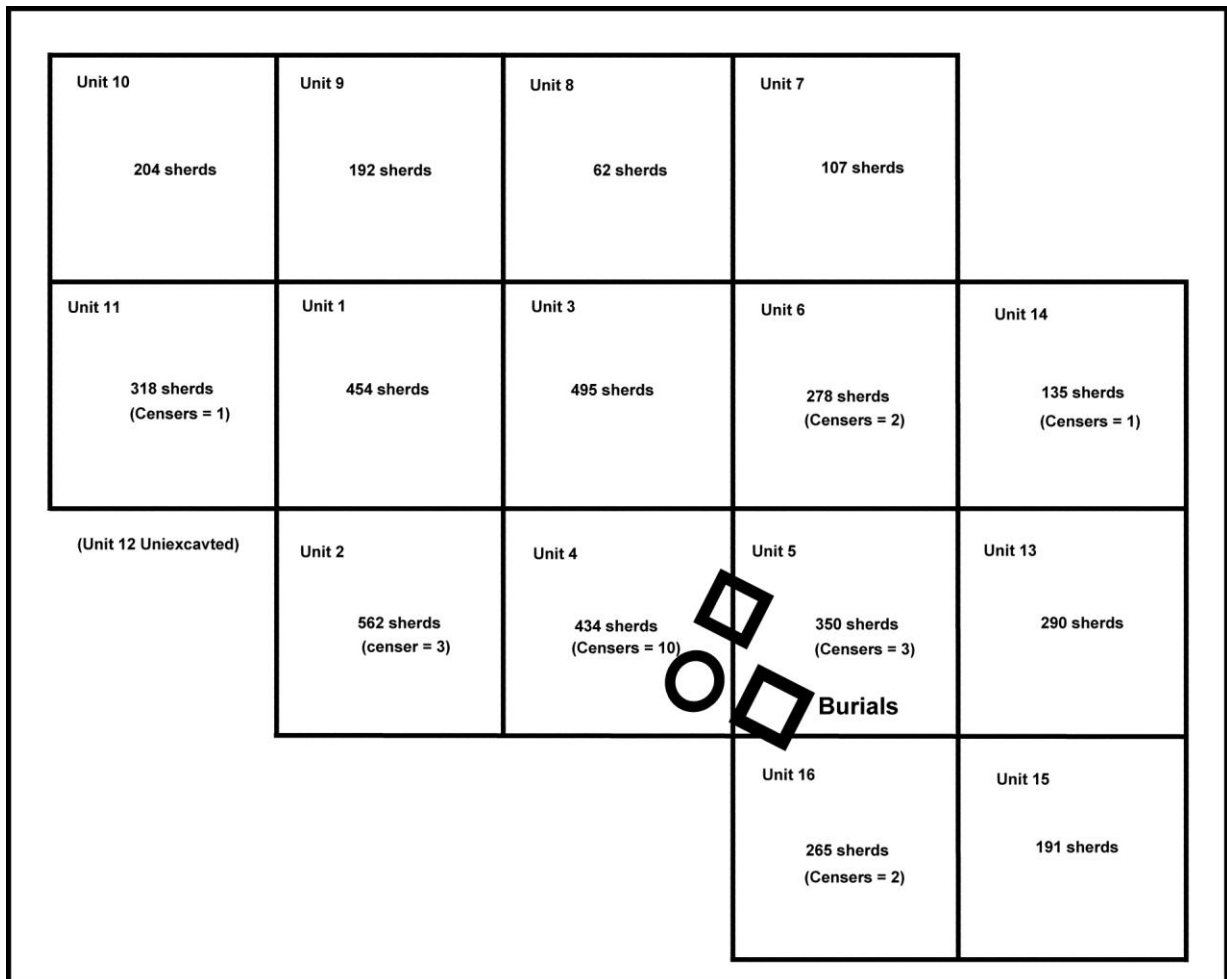


**Figure 6** Perspective view of House 223 talpetate surface, not to scale

An alternate interpretation is that the houselot was abandoned, not reoccupied during the Protohistoric, and that the superficial debris is not related to the use of these features. Since the sampling strategy required placement of test pits at intervals, it is possible there was another, unrecognized feature nearby that was the source of the material remains recovered. While this is possible, Figure 7 illustrates the distribution of ceramic remains recovered from the houselot. Classic period sherds were very rare and overall the materials are consistent with a Protohistoric occupation. The debris is well distributed over the features, with censer sherds, which I presume to be related to household ritual activity generally located in units close to the burials. The sherd concentrations are lowest over the house, an area that would be swept clean during use. The house would also be farthest from discard areas outside houselot. If there was a later house site nearby, certainly occupational debris could be discarded atop the site of the earlier house, but this process should not selectively avoid placing materials over the location of the actual house? Furthermore, if this had been an abandoned house site, not reoccupied, there should have been Classic period debris in the vicinity that would have been recovered during our excavations—we should have found a mixture of Protohistoric and Classic materials. Human activity and weathering would have resulted in redistribution of the debris from the earlier occupation over the location first as the later



house site was prepared, and subsequently during normal activities in the area. The absence of Classic period materials suggests continued cleaning and maintenance of the house site.



**Figure 7** Sherd count and censer sherd distribution at House 223

### Utatlán Non-Elite Houses and the Indigenous K'iche'

The similarity of the four house sites is evidence for a pattern for non-elite residence construction extending from the Classic period through the Protohistoric. When the K'iche' state came to dominate the Guatemalan Highlands near the Quiche Basin the developing elite class, whether of local origins or from elsewhere, began to build stone structures, finely plastered, on flat-topped platforms surrounding interior patios. While this was occurring the indigenous population on the plateaus does not appear to have been displaced. Rather they were incorporated into the community, albeit at the lower rung of the social hierarchy. The presence of the four houses within a defined area of the residence zone and the absence of anomalous structures (except for the royal

tomb) indicate that this lower class was given a place within the community of Utatlán. All of the house sites appear to have been occupied during the Protohistoric. One house, at least, appears to have been occupied by a single residential group for one thousand years. It is tempting to say that this was a family group or an extended family, and this might be a logical inference, but on the basis of the archaeological data we cannot know for certain that the occupants comprised a family. We can only conclude that there was a direct link between the builders of the terrace and those occupying the site a millennium later. Another house site was occupied for over seven centuries. Recent work at Saturday Creek in Belize has also identified a commoner house site that was occupied for several centuries. In the Belize example, the occupation spans 400 CE through 1150 CE (Lucero 146).

Houses cannot tell us the language of the residents, but the ethnohistoric sources document the arrival of foreign speakers, perhaps a Mexicanized group of Chontal Maya warriors, who married into and adopted the language of the indigenous population. The residents of a single household may not be characteristic of the general population, but there were four similar houses, one dating to the sixth century, and another to the ninth century. To the extent these houses represent a pattern, then at least for this plateau it would appear these were the native occupants that the K'iche' lineages of the *Popol Wuj* came to control and dominate. These houses, then, were likely residences for this indigenous population. This can provide supporting evidence for the development of the K'iche' dialect in the area of the Quiche Basin.

The presence of these four houses with the associated Protohistoric materials is also an indication of the incorporation of the indigenous population as an integral part of the community associated with the K'iche' center of Q'umarkaj. The actual composition and role of the houselot residents (family, extended family, or occupational group) remains unknown, but whatever their composition, these households continued to occupy their house sites, and presumably continued to fill their traditional role even as the Mexicanized warlords replaced the indigenous elite and built their conquest state. Who were the K'iche' elite? Were they outsiders who came to dominate and conquer or were they an indigenous group that came to prominence? These are questions the houses cannot answer.

There are limitations in the interpretation of the archaeological materials from the Utatlán residence zone. There were only four non-elite houses excavated. The sampling strategy may have missed other structures within the non-elite zone, and may have been inadequate to accurately characterize the elite zone as well. The strategy of exploration of houselots was determined by the exigencies of time constraints for data recovery, and the strategy for systematic testing was

contingent upon obtaining permission to excavate on private property. The ceramic interpretation was based on general characteristics of the ceramics, and a detailed stratigraphic interpretation was not possible given the superficial nature of most excavation units. It is possible interpretation of plain orange wares as generally Protohistoric could lead to misrepresentation of some household assemblages. The sampling strategy was designed to examine the extent of contiguous occupation in the residence zone, with characterization of specific features encountered as a secondary objective, and an excavation strategy aimed at specifically identifying and exploring residential features might result in a different outcome. Radiocarbon samples assayed were highly selective, and excluded analysis of other samples from superficial zones in midden areas or of samples from brazier sherds, which could provide additional evidence for the length of occupation of features.

### **Limitations**

In spite of the limitations the recovered data appear sufficient to both establish the spatial extent of the Uatatlán residence zone associated with the ceremonial center of Q'umarkaj. It also can establish the presence of a non-elite area within Uatatlán occupied by the indigenous K'iche'. The K'iche' occupied this area for at least a thousand years prior to the Spanish conquest, and for at least seven centuries before the arrival of the migration documented in the *Popol Wuj*. Their presence and their incorporation into the community associated with Q'umarkaj may be important in our continuing endeavors to interpret and understand the ethnohistoric record of highland Guatemala.

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