The 2015 field season at El Achiotal, Guatemala, supported in part by the Stone Center via a Tinker Foundation Summer Fieldwork Grant, was a tremendous success—although, as often happens in archaeology, our most exciting finds were in no way anticipated. My proposal had been to investigate a building—Structure 5C-08—that I suspected to be the earliest at the site, and I planned my excavations to target deeply-buried contexts in this structure. Instead, my excavation on the building’s central axis encountered a shrine containing an important carved monument just beneath the surface, and the full documentation of this context became our primary goal for the remainder of the field season.

This excavation revealed that some time around A.D. 500, the original stairway of Structure 5C-08 was sealed off by the construction of a masonry shrine at its base. Inside this shrine, the ancient Maya placed two broken fragments of a finely-carved limestone monument (known as a “stela” in Mayanist literature). The stela portrayed a man in the typical garb of a Maya king, and the inscription on the back of the monument describes the 40-year anniversary of a king’s accession to the throne—presumably the individual pictured on the front. The timing of this anniversary is particularly interesting, as the stela’s date—A.D. 418—falls exactly 40 years after a poorly-understood geopolitical disruption in the Maya Lowlands, known as the **Entrada** of A.D. 378. It is likely that the ruler in question was installed as part of this political realignment. This monument therefore connects El Achiotal to known historical events in the rest of the region, and will greatly assist in interpreting further discoveries at the site.

The stela shrine at the base of Structure 5C-08 continued to be renovated and revisited for some two centuries following its construction. My excavations documented at least two additions to the structure, each of which consisted of a low platform appended to the front of the earlier structure and a small room added antechamber-like to the shrine itself, resulting in a final structure some six meters wide by eight meters long, with three rooms positioned one in front of the other. The doors of these
rooms were aligned such that an observer standing in the plaza could still see the stela in the original shrine room. Every addition was accompanied by buried offerings of ceramic vessels, obsidian blades, and in one case a number of human bones contained by two lip-to-lip plates.

The building was finally “terminated” around A.D. 700, when a massive offering of broken ceramic vessels was placed in the stela chamber, burying the monument and marking the end of the shrine’s use-life for the community that had been maintaining it. Thus far, these are the latest materials encountered at the site and I suspect that El Achiotal was effectively abandoned by this date if not before.

My investigations in Structure 5C-08 also documented three burial chambers, which had been torn through and emptied by looters during the late 1960s, at which time the site was severely damaged—there are ten looters’ trenches in Structure 5C-08 alone. However, the information salvaged from the looters’ trenches together with the stela shrine they failed to discover indicates that 5C-08 was an extremely important building for the inhabitants of El Achiotal, and future work at the site will involve a more detailed examination of the earlier phases only partially damaged by looters, or perhaps entirely undiscovered.

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