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The Pyramid of Kukulcan, a temple built to honor the feathered serpent god, still stands in Chichen Itza.

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It was long thought that the ancient stone pyramid temples of the Maya were built by their royalty.

Now it turns out any number of different factions among the Maya — nobles, priests and maybe even commoner — may have built temples, scientists now suggest.

The fact that different groups had the will and the power to [build](#) temples suggests "the Maya could choose which temples to worship in and support; they had a voice in who succeeded politically," said researcher Lisa Lucero, an archaeologist at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

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The first temples of the Maya arose more than 2,000 years ago. Their word for these stone pyramids was the same as their word for mountain, and the massive stepped temples at times reached more than 200 feet high.

"Human sacrifice did occur at temples, but only rarely, unlike the Aztec, who sacrificed daily in the belief the sun would not rise otherwise," Lucero said, speaking of the Maya during the Classic Period, from 250 A.D. to 900 A.D. "Only a few powerful Maya kings performed human sacrifice, and they did it to kill rulers from elsewhere. And they didn't do it to bring, say, better weather, but to highlight 'me, me, me.'"

Lucero and her colleagues investigated temples in Yalbac, a Mayan center in the steaming jungles of central Belize. "We were surrounded by howler monkeys, toucans, spider monkeys, orchids, spiders, scorpions and snakes," she recalled. "Killer bees are now in the area, and a hive can just appear one day. I ran immediately when

I saw one, and I was still stung four times."

Mysteriously, there are six temples all close together in Yalbac, ranging from 25 to 50 feet high. "Why did they need six? Did they have one for different days of the week? Different gods? Different seasons?" Lucero wondered.

Upon investigating each temple — which date from the Late Classic period of [Mayan history](#), about 550 to 850 A.D. — she noted their construction and materials could differ from each other quite significantly. Two higher quality temples used larger outermost stones and more mortar to fill the insides of the pyramids. "These essentially cost more money, and may have been royal," Lucero said. "But the other temples may not have been built by royalty at all."

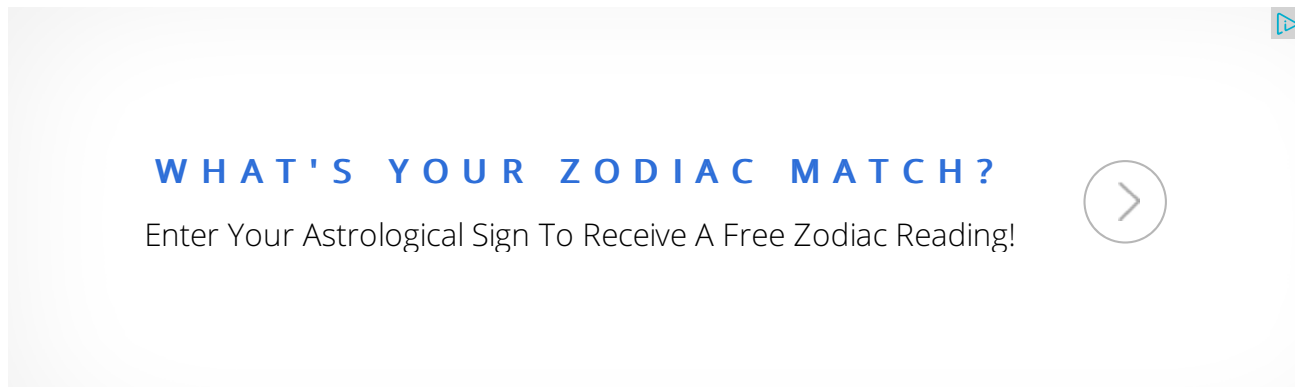
Each temple might have served a different god, such as the rain god Chak, or the sun god or maize god. The building of each temple might also serve as a record of ancient power struggles.

"When a new ruler comes to power, they might build their own place, or if the rulers did not predict the best time to plant crops, others might suggest, 'Come to my temple, the ruler has clearly failed,'" Lucero said.

Looters had carved nine trenches into the Yalbac site in their pursuit of ancient treasure. This summer Lucero and her colleagues hope to see "if the looters missed caches — artifacts consisting of shell, jade, ceramics, lithics, et cetera — that may provide clues as to temple function and purpose," she said.

Lucero and her colleagues detailed their findings in the latest issue of the journal *Latin American Antiquity*.

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