
19 **AVENTURA IN A NORTHERN BELIZE CONTEXT: CHALLENGING TRADITIONAL NARRATIVES OF ANCIENT MAYA CIVILIZATION THROUGH THE RESULTS OF THE 2017 FIELD SEASON**

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This paper draws upon the results of the 2017 field research at Aventura to illustrate how Aventura research challenges traditional narratives about ancient Maya civilization. The Maya site of Aventura, located in northern Belize, is a community with a five millennia history spanning forager-horticulturalist, PreColumbian Maya, historic, and contemporary periods. The Classic Maya city of Aventura had its heyday during the period of the Maya “collapse.” As a community with a five millennia history and a city that survives the period of the “collapse,” Aventura challenges traditional narratives about the trajectory of ancient Maya civilization. While Aventura lacks extensive trappings of Maya high culture (stelae, hieroglyphs, and tall temples) its long history belies its importance and prompts reassessment of traditional measures of high culture and reconsideration of terms such as collapse and decline. Aventura is not unique in northern Belize in terms of its ability to survive, and even thrive, during the “collapse.” Lamanai, Caye Coco, Nohmul, Santa Rita, and Sarteneja, among others, survive the “collapse.” Originally considered a peripheral part of the ancient Maya world, site longevity in northern Belize challenges the identification of this region as peripheral.

Introduction

A central goal of current research on the Aventura Archaeology Project is challenging traditional narratives of Ancient Maya civilization, particularly those that relate to ideas of the Classic Maya collapse. This paper will consider the situation of Aventura in a Northern Belize context and the results of the 2017 research at Aventura, particularly settlement pattern studies and the identification of Aventura as a center for trade and exchange. We consider how new research at Aventura challenges ideas of the Classic Maya collapse and reconfigures understandings of cores and peripheries.

The Classic Maya Collapse in Historical Perspective

A significant focus of research in the Maya area has been on the “collapse” of Maya cities around 900 CE. In a 2007 review article, Aimers noted that more than 400 books, chapters, and articles had been written about the question of the collapse of the Maya. The traditional narrative of the Classic Maya collapse developed across early 20th century research, with its focus on large sites with the most expansive corpus of inscriptions, research concentrating on the larger Maya centers that were precisely those most likely to suffer at the end of the Classic period (e.g., Shook 1958; J. E. S. Thompson 1927). This research focus



Figure 1. Bay of Corozal showing the locations of Aventura, Cerro Maya, and Santa Rita.

generated the idea of a total Maya collapse in 900 CE.

Settlement archaeology in the Maya area, as elsewhere, ushered in a new era of research that expanded upon the range of settlements explored by archaeologists (e.g., Ashmore 1981; D. Z. Chase and A. F. Chase 2010; Foias and Emery 2012; Hutson 2016; Robin 2012, 2013; Willey et al. 1965). Based on this new tradition of research scholars now recognize that while some Maya cities were abandoned around 900 CE others were transformed and even flourished at this time (e.g., Aimers 2007; Demarest et al. 2004; McAnany and Yoffee 2009).

The Terminal Classic collapse was focused on particular regions of the Maya area,

such as the western Petén which had been the heartland of the Classic Maya kingdoms, and likewise Postclassic period florescence (900 – 1500 CE) occurred in other regions, such as Mexico's Yucatan peninsula. There were multiple causes, political, economic, and environmental that led to the collapse, transformation, and florescence of Maya cities around 900 CE (Aimers 2007; Demarest et al. 2004; Masson 2012; Turner and Sabloff 2012). It is within the turbulent period of the Terminal Classic that Aventura reaches its height.

Aventura in a Northern Belize Context

The site of Aventura is located in Belize's northernmost district, Corozal. It is situated in the Corozal Bay area, an inlet in the southwest portion of the Bay of Chetumal which spans what is now the northern part of Belize and the southern part of Quintana Roo. Aventura is located 10 km southwest and 10 km west, respectively, of the better known northern Belize sites of Santa Rita and Cerro Maya (Figure 1).

The Corozal Bay area in which Aventura is located is rich in coastal and riverine resources providing the ecological basis to sustain long-term occupation. Geological surveys of northern Belize locate Aventura in an area with a variety of fertile soils and rich microenvironments (Wright et al. 1959). A 1973 study by Ernestine Green suggests that Aventura and nearby sites were situated to maximize access to fertile soils. The site of Aventura itself was built in an area of pocket *bajos*, non-draining depressions, under 2 km², that may have been used for water management or agriculture (Grauer 2016, 2017). Access to a variety of natural resources can provide a basis for sustainability. But access to natural resources alone does not ensure long-term success (Turner and Sabloff 2012) and research at Aventura is oriented toward understanding the site's longevity.

Collectively, ceramic research from the 2015 through 2017 field seasons of the Aventura Archaeology Project (Kosakowsky 2015, 2016, 2017), a 1974 season by Raymond Sidrys (1983), and 2007 salvage excavations by the Belize Institute of Archaeology (Rafael Guerra, Sherilyn Jones, and Melissa Badillo) provide a consistent picture of Aventura's chronology. Ceramics have been identified at Aventura from

the Middle Preclassic (650-350 BCE) through Late Postclassic (1100-1500 CE). Preclassic material is not substantial, and it appears that Aventura was a small site at this time. Aventura's first period of expansion is the Early Classic period (250-600 CE) and the city reached its settlement peak in the Terminal Classic to Early Postclassic period (750-1100 CE).

The initial 2015 research of the Aventura Archaeology Project expanded our understanding of the time depth of Aventura's chronology to five millennia. Caste War period sites, including a church and two sugar mills are immediately visible at Aventura (Jones 2015; Oland 2017). Additionally, Kosakowsky (2015) identified a Late Archaic (3400-900 BCE) Lowe point and constricted adze.

Aventura is not unique in the Chetumal Bay region in terms of its ability to survive, and even thrive, during the period of the Terminal Classic collapse. Terminal Classic through Early Postclassic continuity is well documented at Lamanai, located 75 km south of Aventura along the New River (e.g., Graham 2000; Pendergast 1986). Other sites in the region also have continuous occupations across the Terminal Classic to Early Postclassic period, such as Caye Coco, Nohmul, Santa Rita, and Sarteneja, among others (e.g., Boxt 1993; D. Z. Chase 1990; D. Z. Chase and A. F. Chase 1988; Hammond et al. 1987; Rosenswig and Masson 2002; summarized in Walker 2016).

Originally considered a peripheral part of the ancient Maya world (e.g., Sidrys 1983), site longevity at Aventura and across northern Belize challenges the identification of this region as peripheral, as recently discussed by Walker (2016). It further prompts us to reconsider the definition and meaning of terms such as core and periphery, foundational terms in archaeology, but terms that have been critiqued due to the original highly polarized concepts associated with them (e.g., Iannone and Connell 2003; Schortman and Urban 1994; Stein 2002). Peripheries were initially conceived of as static, backwards places whereas cores were the pinnacles of culture and society. Northern Belize is situated intermediary between the Petén and the Yucatan, thus the region's intermediary geopolitical siting could have

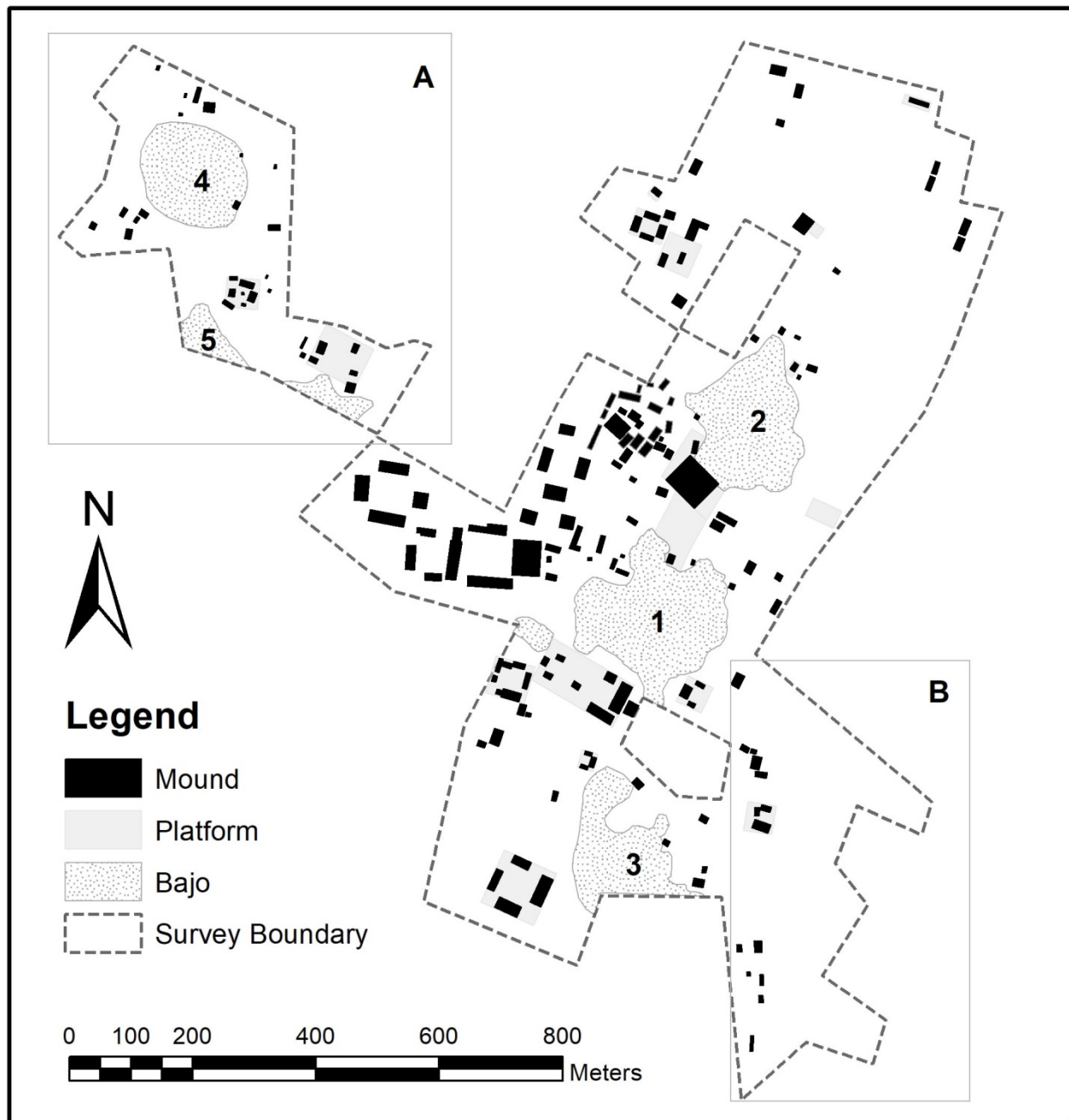


Figure 2. Aventura settlement survey. Survey areas A and B indicate the location of the 2017 survey work. Pocket bajos 1 through 5 which are discussed in the text are marked on the map.

provided its residents an opportunity to engage in trade and other relations with both regions. This intermediary geopolitical situation may have been a mechanism that buffered Aventura and other sites in northern Belize from turbulence that was ongoing in either the Petén or Yucatan. Given Aventura's longevity we need to consider a geopolitical periphery as

potentially advantageous, rather than disadvantageous position, and redefine peripheries as dynamic places that can foster pinnacles of success.

2017 Aventura Settlement Survey Research

As seen in research across the Maya area, settlement survey research at Aventura provides

key data to challenge traditional notions of the Terminal Classic Maya collapse. Settlement and household archaeology revolutionized the study of the world's ancient civilizations by demonstrating that to fully understand human societies researchers needed to investigate a complete range of settlements, especially settlement beyond the monumental cores of cities. Settlement archaeology ushered in a new era of research that expanded upon the range of settlement types explored by archaeologists, and research on cities moved beyond the largest cities and monumental cores of cities (e.g., Ashmore 1981; Creekmore and Fischer 2014; Foias and Emery 2012). In terms of challenging notions of the Terminal Classic Maya collapse, settlement survey research has revealed settlement areas within cities that thrive after the abandonment of civic-ceremonial precincts and entire communities, such as those seen in Northern Belize, that retain urban populations at this period in time.

Cities are as much made up by their households and landscapes as they are by their centers. A focus on the households of a city allows archaeologists to develop peopled understandings of cities. Settlement research brings together an understanding of the communities people built and the environments which they inherited, lived in, and modified (e.g., Ashmore 1981; D. Z. Chase and A. F. Chase 1988; Lucero et al. 2015; Pyburn 1989; Scarborough, Valdez, and Dunning 2003). This intellectual milieu structures the Aventura settlement survey research. The 2017 settlement survey at Aventura was directed by Kacey Grauer (2017) and Kat Fitzgerald (2017).

Survey research from the 2015, 2016, and 2017 seasons completed a survey of a 1 sq km area around the site core of Aventura using Global Positioning System (GPS), Total Station (ES-103 and GTS-605), and Geographical Information System (GIS) technology, and to develop 2D and 3D georeferenced digital imagery of cultural and natural features (Figure 2). The Aventura survey research is designed to enable systematic and full-coverage survey in an area of predominantly cane farming and some forest canopy above the largest mounds. The settlement survey research collects information on natural features (land formations, vegetation,

environment), cultural features (architecture, agricultural fields, other human constructions), and chronology (relative dating of archaeological features through surface ceramic analysis). The survey utilized three survey techniques to achieve its goals: (1) topographic mapping, (2) archaeological reconnaissance, and (3) surface ceramic analysis.

Grauer's research (2017) undertook the first survey research west of Aventura's site core (see Figure 2, survey area A). Grauer's survey research was designed to examine the extent of pocket *bajos* across the Aventura landscape and investigate the relationship between pocket *bajos* and settlement beyond Aventura's site core. Previous research by both the Aventura Archaeology Project (Robin et al. 2017) and Sidrys (1983) had documented pocket *bajos* as central elements of Aventura's civic-ceremonial landscape, but little was known about the broader distributions of pocket *bajos* and settlement across the landscape.

Grauer's research (2017) identified two additional pocket *bajos* situated northwest of Aventura's civic-ceremonial precinct, pocket *bajos* 4 and 5, as well as 62 archaeological features, including 35 mounds, 4 platforms, 4 chultuns, and 19 other features. Pocket *bajo* 4 was mapped in its entirety (see Figure 2). While pocket *bajos* 1, 2, and 5 are located adjacent to Aventura's civic-ceremonial precinct, pocket *bajos* 3 and 4 are located beyond the civic-ceremonial precinct and associated with both elite and commoner households (see Figure 2). Field observation of the presence of pocket *bajos* across the Aventura landscape beyond the survey research area suggests a broad and intermingled distribution of pocket *bajos* and settlement as seen in the survey area. Key findings of Grauer's research (2017) include: (1) an understanding of the intermingled distribution of settlement and pocket *bajos* at Aventura extending beyond the civic-ceremonial precinct and (2) the presence of commoner settlement along the edges of pocket *bajos*. At Aventura both elites and commoners lived in proximity to pocket *bajos*.

A focus of Fitzgerald's (2017) survey research was to examine the eastern extent of Aventura's settlement moving towards the New River, particularly settlement east of the

Northern Highway (see Figure 2, survey area B) as well as place cement survey monuments for future research and further the remapping of Aventura's civic-ceremonial precinct. In survey area B, Fitzgerald's research east of the Northern Highway identified 13 mound features all located within 0.15 kilometers from the highway. East of these the survey identified sloping terrain leading into the New River floodplain that generally lacked associated mound features (Figure 3). Thus although Aventura's civic-center is located over 2 kilometers west of the New River, it is likely its ancient inhabitants constructed their city on the edge of habitable terrain adjacent to the New River.

Across the 2015 to 2017 survey work, a total of 246 features were identified including 168 mounds, 25 platforms, 8 chultuns, 5 pocket *bajos*, and 39 other features (Fitzgerald 2017). The 168 mounds per square kilometer identified in the 1 square kilometer survey of Aventura is less than the 206 mounds per square kilometer identified in the initial 0.5 square kilometer survey of Aventura (Robin et al. 2017) due to the larger number of pocket *bajos* and seasonally inundated lands included in the broader 1 square kilometer survey area. Mound density at Aventura remains in the mid-range of densities for Maya urban centers, which range from dense settlements such as Caracol with a density of over 300 mounds per square kilometer and centers such as Xunantunch with a density of 88 mounds per square kilometer (Yaeger 2010). Kosakowsky (2015, 2016, 2017) analyzed 132 diagnostic surface collections identifying Aventura's settlement peak in the Terminal Classic to Early Postclassic period as 88% (116 of 132) surface collections had diagnostic material from this time period. Settlement survey research at Aventura to date identifies an urban center that reached its settlement peak in the period of the Terminal Classic Maya collapse, challenging traditional narratives.

2017 A Plaza Test Pit and Post Hole Testing Program

Zachary Nissen (2017) directed the Operation 3 test pitting and post hole testing program in and around Aventura's A Plaza, the central plaza at Aventura. Seven 2 meter by 1

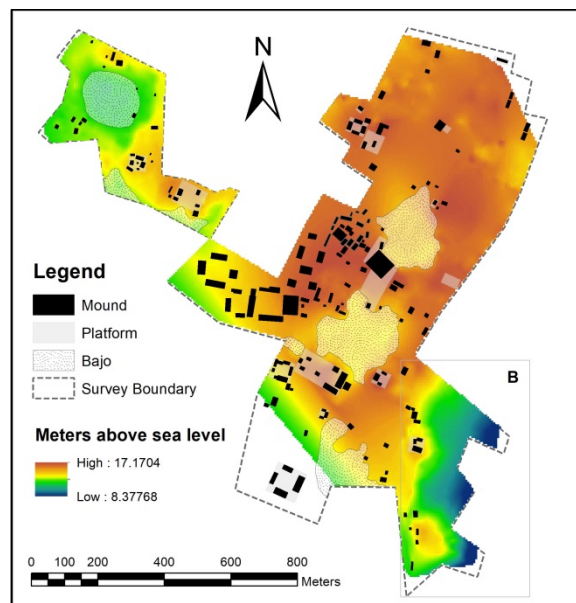


Figure 3. Topographic map of Aventura survey area.

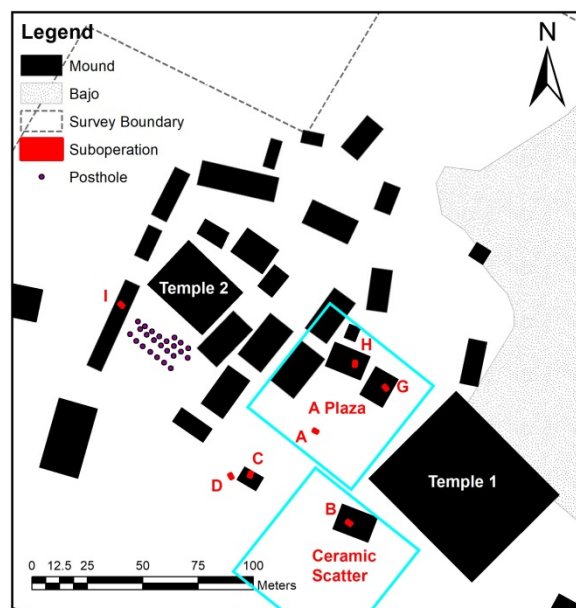


Figure 4. Aventura's A Plaza showing the location of 2017 test pits (suboperations), post holes, and the ceramic scatter.

meter test pits were placed in smaller buildings around the A Plaza (Figure 4). Excavations were conducted following cultural stratigraphy which was subdivided into 10 centimeter lots where cultural strata were deeper than 10 centimeters. All excavated material was screened through ¼ inch mesh and soil and flotation samples were taken from representative contexts.

Intriguing about the spatial layout of Aventura's A Plaza is that 27 smaller structures are located around Temples 1 and 2. Although he did not conduct excavations in the 27 smaller structures, Sidrys (1983:22-23) postulated that many of the structures were residential buildings dating to the Late Postclassic period that had filled in the A Plaza after the abandonment of Aventura's ceremonial-center. Nissen's test pitting program refuted the claim that all of the 27 smaller structures in and around the A Plaza were residential and Kosakowsky's (2017) ceramic assessment of material from the Operation 3 test pits refuted the Late Postclassic dating of the seven small buildings tested. Late Postclassic *Chen Mul Incensario* fragments were identified in Nissen's post hole testing work (see Figure 4) south of Plaza A Temple 2 that investigated an area approximately 15 meters south of the temple where Sidrys (1983: 49) had identified a large censer deposit which he estimated contained 67,720 fragments.

Terminal architecture at the seven A Plaza buildings tested by Nissen dated to the Terminal Classic to Early Postclassic period contemporary with Aventura's settlement peak (Kosakowsky 2017). One test pit provided novel information about Aventura's role as a regional trade and exchange center. The Operation 3 Suboperation B (Op. 3.B) test pit investigated a low mound barely visible on the surface south of Plaza A Temple 1 (see Figure 4). Op. 3.B was placed in the single-most mounded area within a surface ceramic scatter that measured roughly 60 meters by 60 meters. The 60 meter by 60 meter area of the ceramic scatter is roughly the same size as the open area of Aventura's central A Plaza that lies between Temples 1 and 2.

Nissen's Op. 3.B excavations revealed a sequence of 18 shallow floors that each comprised a single layer or pavement of small unslipped sherds (Figure 5). Due to time constraints and the tedious nature of excavating each floor layer, the excavations did not reach bedrock, and certainly there is more cultural material below the 18 floors.

A total of 192,499 sherds were collected from the 1 meter by 2 meter Op. 3.B test pit. Based on the size of the sherd scatter we project that there are over 350 million sherds in the scatter. Kosakowsky (2017) identified 192,422



Figure 5. Operation 3.B east profile showing the sequence of 18 shallow floors each comprising a single layer or pavement of Coconut Walk Unslipped sherds. Photograph by Zachary Nissen.

of the 192,499 sherds as Coconut Walk Unslipped, an expedient type of ceramic linked to salt production and trade at coastal sites in Belize (Graham 1994; McKillop 2002; Robertson 2016; Valdez et al. 1995). It is unclear from Kosakowsky's ceramic evidence if salt production was going on at Aventura because no non-ceramic vessel briquetage which is typically associated with large-scale evaporation-based salt production techniques was found. Based on ceramic evidence, Kosakowsky put forward a number of plausible explanations for the Coconut Walk Unslipped deposits at Aventura: (1) they could be the remains of salt trading vessels, (2) Coconut Walk Unslipped vessels could have been produced at Aventura and exported to coastal salt-making centers, and (3) the vessels could have been used for multiple purposes (Aimers et al. 2016). Kosakowsky provisionally dates the Coconut Walk Unslipped sherds at Aventura to the Late to Terminal Classic to Early Postclassic

period based on comparison with Aimers and colleagues (2016) work on this ceramic type.

Anna Tolley's (2018) senior thesis research provided additional insight into the nature of the Coconut Walk Unslipped deposits. Tolley examined the microartifacts from three heavy fraction samples from Op. 3.B lots 7, 18, and 19. The microartifact analysis from all three analyzed lots yielded marine shell fragments which zooarchaeologists Norbert Stanchly and Angela Keller independently identified over email as *Cerithium* species and *Lampanella* or *Batillaria* species. These small marine shells are environmental indicators of shallow coastal water intertidal areas that can be associated with salt extraction and suggest that the Coconut Walk Unslipped ceramics could have originated from coastal areas and been brought to Aventura. What was placed in Aventura's Coconut Walk Unslipped ceramics and why were they broken and incorporated into floors at Aventura? Possibly salt or a salt related product such as salted fish was being brought to Aventura in the Coconut Walk Unslipped ceramics. Ethnographic evidence, discussed by McKillop (2002), suggests that salt could be traded in ceramics which would be broken to remove the salt. While only future full-scale horizontal excavations will be able to answer these questions, current evidence from Operation 3 suggests that Aventura was a center for regional trade and exchange during the Terminal Classic to Early Postclassic period.

Conclusion

The results of the 2017 season at Aventura challenge traditional narratives of the collapse of Maya cities in the Terminal Classic period. Aventura was an urban center that thrived and reached its settlement maximum in the Terminal Classic to Early Postclassic period. The wealth of pocket *bajos* and floodplains documented across Aventura's landscape provided important resources for elites, commoners, and the city alike. New excavations identify that Aventura was a center for regional trade and exchange, possibly in salt or a salted fish or other products. Aventura's five millenia history and Terminal Classic settlement peak belies the city's importance. Situated in a Northern Belize context of cities that thrive during the Terminal

Classic period, places like Aventura prompt us to challenge traditional definitions of concepts such as periphery and collapse.

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