
1 THE ROLE OF NORTHERN BELIZE IN SHAPING MAYA ARCHAEOLOGY

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This article addresses the critical role that archaeology in Northern Belize has played in shaping Maya Archaeology. It traces the history of archaeological research in Northern Belize and identifies three areas in which Northern Belize research has transformed the nature of Maya Archaeology. First, excavations at Northern Belize archaeological sites have been critical in providing the empirical evidence for the duration of human occupation in the Maya area. Second, the robust picture of the longevity of human occupation revealed by Northern Belize research provides a concerted challenge to traditional narratives of Maya archaeology, particularly narratives of the “collapse” of Maya society. Third, female leadership in archaeological project direction, artifact analyses, and scholarly publication in Northern Belize broke down barriers for the inclusion of women and other underrepresented groups in archaeology widening the lens of participation and production in archaeology. Across its history, research in Northern Belize has been on the forefront of transformations advancing both the understanding and practice of Maya archaeology.

Introduction

Archaeological research in Northern Belize has played a seminal role in shaping Maya archaeology. This article traces the history of archaeological research in Northern Belize to highlight three areas in which Northern Belize research has transformed the nature of Maya Archaeology. First, excavations at Northern Belize archaeological sites have been key in providing the empirical evidence for the duration of human occupation in the Maya area. This empirical evidence can be seen in the abundance of significant Formative and Postclassic sites in Northern Belize, which expand our understanding of the longevity of the pre-Columbian Maya both prior to and after the Classic period. As well, significant investigations into Archaic, Colonial, and Historic periods complete our understanding of the expanse of human occupation in the Maya area. Second, the robust picture of the longevity of human occupation revealed by Northern Belize research provides a concerted challenge to traditional narratives of Maya archaeology, particularly narratives of the “collapse” of Maya society. Northern Belize research challenges, as well, a host of erroneous notions embedded in foundational principles of Maya civilization, such as the widespread existence of vacant ceremonial centers, swidden agricultural regimes, peasant autonomy, and political hierarchy. Third, female leadership in archaeological project direction, artifact analyses, and scholarly publication in Northern

Belize broke down barriers for the inclusion of women and other underrepresented groups in archaeology widening the lens of participation and production in archaeology. Across its history, research in Northern Belize has been on the forefront of transformations advancing both the understanding and practice of Maya archaeology.

Northern Belize as a region can be defined in a number of ways. Geopolitically, Northern Belize is the northern part of Belize situated between the Caribbean Sea to the east, the Rio Hondo and Mexico to the north and northwest and Guatemala to the west. Belize’s largest river, the Belize River, divides the county into a northern region of limestone lowlands with occasional hilly terrain and a southern region of limestone hills and the granite Maya Mountains. Administratively contemporary Belize consists of six districts with Northern Belize constituted by the northern most Corozal and Orange Walk districts. For the purposes of this article, I locate Northern Belize as the area of Belize that is north of the Belize River east branch (including the northern part of the Belize district along with the Corozal and Orange Walk districts; Figure 1). Two previous articles on the history of archaeological research across the entirety of Belize, a 1982 article by Norman Hammond and a 1993 article by David Pendergast, were written as archaeological research was expanding in Belize and provide historical information on some of the earlier

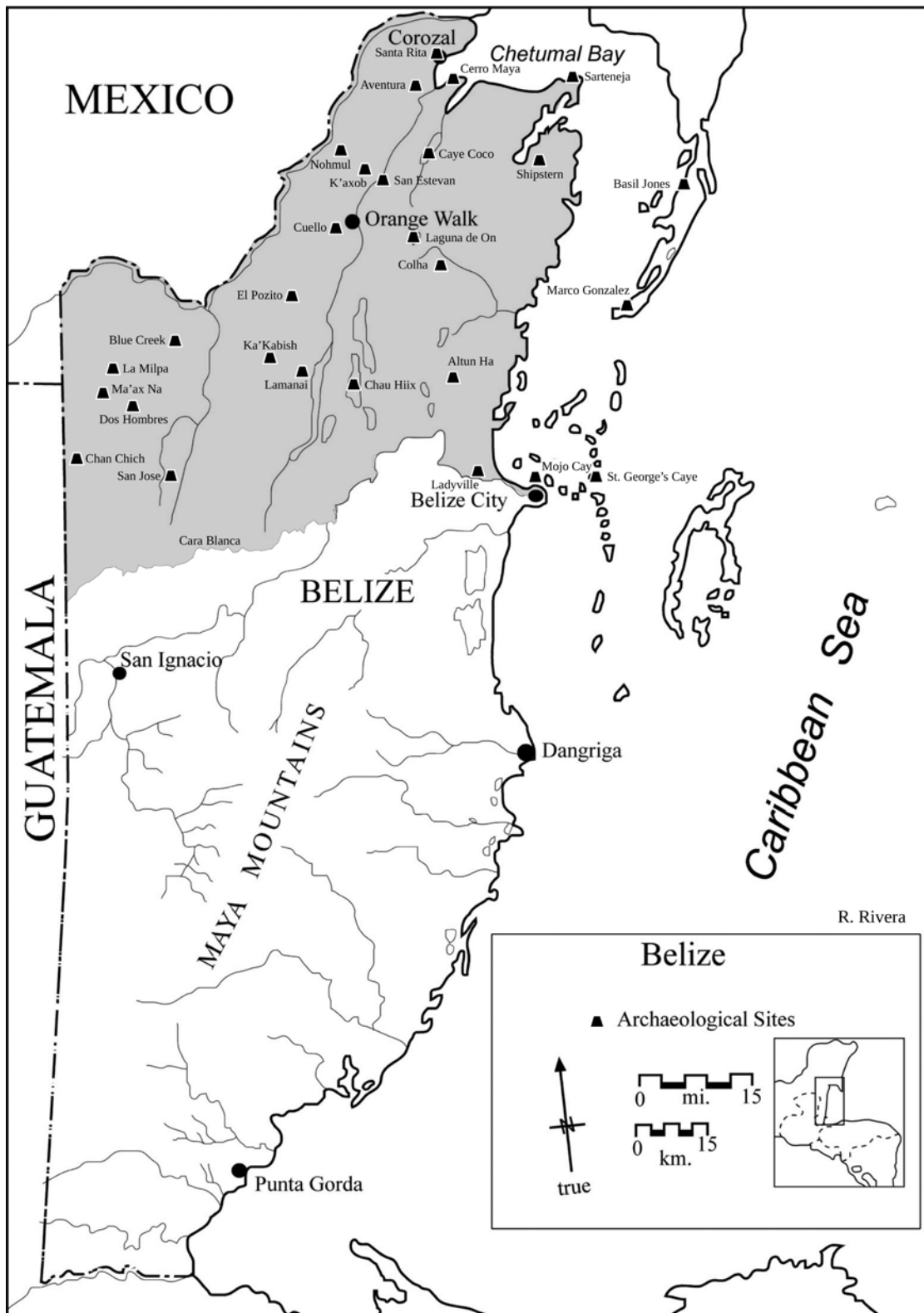


Figure 1. Archaeological Sites in Northern Belize. Map by René Rivera.

periods in the history of Northern Belize archaeology also discussed in this article.

Early Archaeological Research in Northern Belize

Early European conceptions of the history and prehistory of Belize were misguided. In the mid-19th century the American explorer, John Lloyd Stevens, and English artist, Frederick Catherwood, traveled the Maya area, publishing their explorations in two two-volume sets (Stevens 1941, 1943). Their books brought the grandeur of Maya civilization to a worldwide audience. In the 1841 book *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan*, Stevens said of then contemporary Belize (Belize) that: “Between it and the inhabited part of Central America is a wilderness, unbroken even by an Indian path. There is no communication with the interior except by the Golfo Dulce or the Balize River; and, from want of roads, a residence there is more confining than living on an island” (1841: 19; also cited by Pendergast 1993: 1). Although an uninformed characterization of Belize, the idea that Belize was a remote wilderness, a periphery, set the stage for generations of thought in Maya archaeology.

The early history of archaeological research in Northern Belize, as all across the Maya area, was no model for how to conduct archaeological research. The first archaeological excavations in northern Belize are credited to the notorious Dr. Thomas Gann, a British medical officer stationed in Corozal between 1894 and 1923, who transferred to Corozal after serving two years as a medical officer in Cayo (Thompson 1975). Gann conducted excavations at Santa Rita, Aventura, Nohmul, Lamanai, Louisville and many other Northern Belize sites (e.g., Gann 1900). He undertook excavations across Belize, but Northern Belize was a focus for Gann due to its proximity to and the duration of his medical practice in Corozal. Gann largely conducted his research on his own, but late in his life he married Mary Gann with whom he conducted excavations and co-authored publications (Gann and Gann 1939). Thomas Gann had no archaeological training. His excavations were often unsupervised, as he attended to his

patients, and his reporting was minimal. His publications provide a limited record of early archaeological research (Chase 1985; Hammond 1982; Pendergast 1993; Thompson 1975). Today unsightly gaping holes in mounds at sites across Belize where Gann worked are referred to as “Gann holes” to acknowledge the inadequate nature of his archaeological work.

Initiation and Expansion of Rigorous Archaeological Research in Northern Belize

Prior to the mid-1960s archaeologists working in Northern Belize conducted limited survey research, site visits, and small-scale excavations. J. Eric S. Thompson (1938) conducted excavations at San Jose, visited La Milpa, and documented the location of a number of Northern Belize sites. W. Haberland (1958) conducted salvage excavation of a Middle Preclassic round structure at Louisville. William Bullard (1965) investigated two Early Classic structures at San Estevan. However, it was not until the mid-1960s that the archaeological community harnessed the potential of rigorous research in Northern Belize.

The first long-term, large-scale archaeological study in Northern Belize was initiated by David Pendergast at Altun Ha in 1964, a project that ran until 1970 (Pendergast 1979, 1982a). Indeed, Pendergast’s Altun Ha project was the first long-term, large-scale research project in Belize and it ushered in a new era of rigorous modern archaeological research, recording, and publication. Pendergast designed the Altun Ha research to challenge the idea that Belize was a peripheral part of the Maya world. Research at Altun Ha took up this challenge in many ways. In the absence of stelae, a hallmark of royal and elite culture in the central Petén area, Altun Ha is the kind of site that previous archaeologists would have overlooked, considering them of lesser importance in Maya prehistory. However, Pendergast’s research revealed that Altun Ha housed unusual wealth, most notable of which is the jade head, which depicts the sun god Kinich Ahau and is the largest carved jade object in the Maya area.

Pendergast’s research provided a guide for a new generation of archaeological researchers committed to long-term, research-

Table 1. Archaeological projects in Northern Belize listed by project start date.

Site/Area	Principle Investigator(s)	Dates
Northern Belize Archaic	Robert Rosenswig	2019-present
Aventura	Cynthia Robin	2015-present
Cuello	James Fitzsimmons	2015, 2017
Belize Estates	Brett Houk	2013-present
Santa Rita	Jaime Awe	2013, 2014
Belize River East	Eleanor Harrison-Buck	2011-present
St. George's Caye	James Garber and Jaime Awe	2009-2016
Ka'Kabish	Helen Haines	2007-present
Aventura	Jaime Awe	2007
San Estevan	Robert Rosenswig	2005, 2008
Lamanai	Elizabeth Graham	2004-present
Blue Creek	Jon Lohse	2002-2006
Northern Belize Coast	Shirley Mock	1998-2004
Chan Chich	Brett Houk	1997-1999, 2001, 2012-present
Cara Blanca	Lisa Lucero	1997-present
Belize Postclassic	Marilyn Masson	1996-2003
Program for Belize	Fred Valdez	1992-present
La Milpa	Norman Hammond	1992-2002
Cerro Maya	Debra Walker	1992-1995
Blue Creek	Thomas Guderjan	1991-2001, 2007-present
Honey Camp	Fred Valdez	1991
Chau Hiix	Anne Pyburn	1990-2007
K'axob	Patricia McAnany	1990-1998
Kichpanha	Leslie Shaw	1990
Colha	Fred Valdez	1989, 2009, 2017
San Estevan	Laura Levi	1989-1990
Albion Island	Anne Pyburn	1989
Rio Bravo	Thomas Guderjan	1988, 1990
Sarteneja	Matthew Boxt	1986-1987

Ambergris Caye	Thomas Guderjan	1985-1989
Kichpanha	Eric Gibson	1985-1988
Marco Gonzalez	Elizabeth Graham	1984-1994
Belize Archaic	Richard MacNeish	1980-1983
Northern Wetlands	Mary Pohl	1980, 1991-1995
Colha	Thomas Hester and Harry Shafer	1979-1995
Santa Rita	Diane Chase and Arlen Chase	1979-1985
Pulltrouser Swamp	B.L. Turner and Peter Harrison	1979, 1981
Moho Cay	Heather McKillop	1979
El Pozito	Mary Neivens	1976
Cuello	Norman Hammond	1975-2002
Lamanai	David Pendergast	1974-1986
Multiple	Raymond Sidrys	1974
Nohmul	Norman Hammond	1973-1986
Cerro Maya	David Freidel	1973-1981
Rio Hondo	Alfred Siemens and Dennis Puleston	1973-1974
Corozal Survey	Norman Hammond	1972-1974
Multiple	Ernestene Green	1971
Altun Ha	David Pendergast	1964-1970
San Estevan	William Bullard	1962
Louisville	W. Haberland	1958
Multiple	J. Eric S. Thompson	1938
Multiple	Thomas Gann	1894-1936

oriented projects. In the year 1970, his was the only research project in Northern Belize. Across the 1970s, 13 new archaeological projects were initiated in Northern Belize (Table 1), laying the foundation for the region's transformative role in Maya archaeology. Indeed, writing in 1982, Norman Hammond noted that Northern Belize was both the most densely populated region of Belize in terms of archaeological research projects and one of the most densely populated regions by archaeologists in the entirety of the Maya area. Although today Northern Belize has lost that crown to the Cayo district, the impact of

Northern Belize research on Maya archaeology remains profound.

Nine of the new 1970s research projects made multiyear commitments to large-scale research in Northern Belize. These projects were pivotal in challenging key assumptions in traditional thought within Maya archaeology. Norman Hammond's research at Cuello (1975-2002) and David Freidel's research at Cerro Maya (1973-1981) reconfigured our understanding of the complexity of the Maya Formative period and at the other end of the temporal spectrum Diane Chase and Arlen

Chase's work at Santa Rita (1979-1985) dispelled notions of a degraded Postclassic Maya society. David Pendergast's second project at Lamanai (1974-1986) alongside later research there by Elizabeth Graham documented the duration of Maya occupation in a single city challenging the idea of a civilizational-wide Maya collapse. Collectively, research along the Rio Hondo by Scott Siemens and Dennis Puleston (1973-1974) and at Pulltrouser Swamp by B. L. Turner and Peter Harrison (1979, 1981) challenged the idea that Pre-Columbian agricultural practices were dominated by a single-system of swidden agriculture, as was the case for the then contemporary Maya. Thomas Hester and Harry Shafer's project at Colha (1979-1993) identified the existence of a craft specialized community.

The host of archaeological projects begun in the 1970s in Northern Belize were path breaking in shattering academic preconceptions in Maya archaeology. They were equally path breaking in transforming the gender dynamics of the field of Maya archaeology and leading the way to the greater inclusion of women and underrepresented groups in Maya archaeology. Five pioneering female archaeologists led archaeological projects in Northern Belize that began in the 1970's, transforming the gender dynamics of the field. In 1971, Ernestine Green's research at Aventura and Santa Rita and their vicinity brought together concerns with settlement and environment. Mary Neivens led research at El Pozito in 1976 where she identified an obsidian workshop. Elizabeth Graham served as the Archaeological Commissioner of Belize from 1977 to 1979. She later directed research at Marco Gonzales and Tipu and subsequently directed research at Lamanai following David Pendergast's project. Heather McKillop directed research at Moho Cay in 1979 identifying the characteristics of an ancient port and continued her work focusing on coastal Southern Belize. Diane Chase directed the Santa Rita project starting in 1979 and continued the project in subsequent years with Arlen Chase, later co-directing research at Caracol with Arlen Chase.

Female lab directors, field directors, and analytical specialists in the 1970s also played important roles in transforming the gender

dynamics in the field. Robin Robertson was the laboratory director, chief financial officer, ceramic analyst, and senior editor on the Cerro Maya project directed by David Freidel (Robertson and Freidel 1986). Sara Donaghey of the York Archaeological Trust was the site director and Priscilla Wegars was the laboratory manager at Cuello in the 1970s where Norman Hammond directed research. In his preface to the now seminal volume, *Pulltrouser Swamp: Ancient Maya Habitat, Agriculture, and Settlement in Northern Belize* (Turner and Harrison 1983), B.L. Turner acknowledges two of the project's female staff members, Nancy Ettlinger and Janice Darch, who in 1979 "held the field camp and project together for the entire field season. At one time or another, these two acted as field cooks, accountants, drivers, and counselors, in addition to their research activities. Without their enormous personal efforts and their abilities to put up with the project director, it is doubtful that the project could have succeeded" (Turner 1983: xii). This acknowledgement illustrates the key role that women played in the 1970s in transforming gender dynamics in Maya archaeology be it in their leadership of projects or formal or informal roles as senior project personnel. It also recognizes the extended efforts, above research ability, that women needed to undertake to achieve their professional goals.

The legacy of the pioneering female archaeologists of the 1970s is demonstrated in the prominence of female-run research projects in Northern Belize. Historically, one third of Northern Belize research projects have been run by women (see Table 1).

Archaeology in Northern Belize: Challenging Traditional Narratives in Maya Archaeology

The prevailing model of Maya civilization in the 1960s was the "vacant ceremonial center model" proposed by then leading Maya archaeologist J. Eric S. Thompson (1954). As noted above, this was the time when rigorous archaeological research was being initiated in Northern Belize, research that would challenge and replace prevailing understandings in Maya archaeology, such as the "vacant ceremonial center model". This model identified that Maya civilization was dominated by "vacant" centers

inhabited by priests who were supported by a small class of peasants who practiced slash and burn (swidden) agriculture, as was practiced across the cotemporary Maya area at the time. There were no true cities and urban populations. The focus of research by the 1960s had been on the large Maya centers of the Classic period (250 to 900 CE), particularly those in the Petén area, the area that saw the most extreme collapse at the end of the Classic period. Formative antecedents and Postclassic predecessors to the Classic period were less understood and their events were portrayed as of lesser importance than events of the Classic period. This traditional model of the ancient Maya is now largely a historical footnote in the development of Maya archaeology and that is due in large part to the findings of archaeological research in Northern Belize.

Challenging the Timelessness of Swidden Dominant Agricultural Systems

At the heart of the traditional model of the ancient Maya was the idea that ancient agriculture mirrored the maize monocrop focused extensive swidden agriculture recorded in ethnographic accounts. Swidden agriculture is a form of agriculture that involves the cutting and burning of vegetation to create a clear field, which after being planted and harvested, must be left fallow for a number of years to regenerate its soils before being cut, burned, and planted again. A swidden agricultural system cannot support large populations because as an extensive system of agriculture it requires large amounts of land because fields have to be left fallow for a number of years between planting. As the “vacant ceremonial center model” proposed, ancient Maya society, based solely on swidden agriculture, would have had a low-level non-urban population.

Research in Northern Belize in the 1970s by Alfred Siemens and Dennis Puleston along the Rio Hondo and by B.L. Turner and Peter Harrison at Pulltrouser swamp identified intensive forms of ancient agriculture, such as raised fields, that do not have contemporary parallels (Puleston 1977; Turner and Harrison 1983). Raised field agriculture can be found in the shallow, swampy areas of wetlands and lake margins. It is an intensive form of agriculture

where raised fields are built up from adjacent organic-rich soils, leaving watery canals around the organic-rich fields that provide constant irrigation. The research at Rio Hondo and Pulltrouser swamp broke down the idea that there was a timeless form of agriculture in the Maya area that could not support large populations.

Ensuing research across Northern Belize has identified a mosaic of ancient agricultural practices that supported larger and urban populations. More recent research has revealed the antiquity, extent, organization, crop diversity, and surplus potential of Northern Belize raised field agriculture. Key studies include, Mary Pohl and colleagues’ (1996) work in Northern Belize wetland contexts, Julie Kunen’s (2004) and Nicholas Dunning and colleagues’ (2003) work in the Far West Bajo, Tom Guderjan’s (2007) work in the Rio Bravo drainage, and Vernon Scarborough’s (1983) work in the Cerro Maya canals and raised fields. Raised field agriculture was but one type of intensive agriculture practiced by the ancient Maya of Northern Belize that promoted sustainable agriculture. Upland agricultural terracing, as identified in the Program for Belize conservation area and around Blue Creek, allowed the creation of planting surfaces on slopes with enhanced soil moisture (e.g., Dunning et al. 2003; Guderjan 2007a). Pulltrouser Swamp and Northern Belize raised field agriculture remain the classic examples of Maya raised field agriculture discussed in contemporary textbooks that chronicle the key highlights in Maya archaeology (e.g., McKillop 2004: 316, 337; Sharer 1994: 448-450).

Challenging Autonomy

Another assumption of the traditional model is the existence of autonomous subsistence focused peasants who produce all of their own needs. In an autonomous model people live an isolated existence devoid of complex networks of trade and exchange. Evidence of craft specialization and craft specialized communities challenges the idea that the ancient Maya lived in autonomous worlds because craft producers would have traded and exchanged their goods with others in return for other goods and services, creating an

interconnected world. Research initiated by Thomas Hester and Harry Shaffer in the 1970s and 1980s and furthered by many of their colleagues, shattered the idea of autonomous peasants by demonstrating the existence of the two millennia history of a lithic production craft specialized community at Colha that exported in large numbers to regional Maya consumers (e.g., Shafer and Hester 1991). Colha, located in the heart of the Northern Belize chert-bearing zone, had access to the highest quality chert allowing its residents to produce stone tools that were dispersed across the Maya area and even throughout Mesoamerica. Colha is another iconic Northern Belize example featured in textbooks as the exemplary Maya craft specialized community (e.g., McKillop 2004: 125-126; Sharer 1994: 511).

Lithic craft specialization existed across multiple scales in Northern Belize as evidenced by Brett Houk and Gregory Zaro's (2015) more recent identification of a non-elite specialized lithic production neighborhood in the periphery of Chan Chich and Brandon Lewis' (2003) identification of part-time lithic production.

Vernon Scarborough and Fred Valdez (2003) utilize the term "resource specialized communities" to discuss resource-specific or land-use-specific communities that highlight the interdependent nature of Maya communities. In addition to the aforementioned lithic resources, resource-specialized communities may be focused around any product, such as agricultural products or water resources (e.g., Kunen 2004; Hageman and Lohse 2003; Pyburn et al. 1998), marine or salt resources (e.g., Graham and Pendergast 1986; Mock 1997; Walker 2016). The identification of resource specialized communities and the trading ports that moved goods in and out of Northern Belize (e.g., Graham and Pendergast 1986; Guderjan 2007b; McKillop 2004; Walker 2016) is a key contribution to understanding interconnected Maya communities.

Challenging the Lesser Significance of Time Periods Before the Classic Period: Formative and Archaic Developments

The lesser significance of time periods and developments occurring before the Classic period (250-900 CE) set up the grandeur of the

Classic period in the traditional model. Work begun in the 1970's by Norman Hammond at Cuello and David Freidel at Cerro Maya reconfigured our understanding of the complexity of the Maya Formative period and identified Northern Belize as a key locale for the study of the development of Maya civilization. Norman Hammond's (1991) research at Cuello revised our understanding of the nature of domestic and ceremonial architecture, community organization, and long-distance trade in the Formative period. Laura Kosakowsky's (1987) identification of Swasey phase ceramics at Cuello, pushed our dating of the Maya Formative back to 800/1000 BCE.

David Freidel's research at Cerro Maya revealed Late Formative occupation of substantial magnitude that shook up scholarly understandings of the Formative to Classic transition and specifically documented the Formative origins of many Classic Maya institutions (e.g., Freidel and Schele 1988; Robertson and Freidel 1986). The iconic masks of Structure 5c 2nd at Cerro Maya encode Maya cosmological orders that framed the king as the pivot of the world. The research at Cerro Maya and Cuello remain landmark studies in textbooks defining the Formative Maya (e.g., McKillop 2004: 8, 51-52; Sharer 1994: 81, 116-122).

More recent research at Northern Belize Formative sites, such as Patricia McAnany's (2004) research at K'axob, has identified the deep history of foundational practices that formed the core of Maya society, such as the importance of ancestor veneration and commoner ritual practices. Formative occupation is now documented at many if not most archaeological sites in Northern Belize continuing to point to Northern Belize's legacy in understanding the origins and development of Maya civilization (see Walker 2016: Table 1.1).

Even earlier questions of origins, such as the transitions from hunting and gathering, forager-horticulturalists, to sedentary farming, can be addressed in Northern Belize. In 1980, Richard MacNeish initiated a transformative study of the preceramic Archaic period in Belize (MacNeish and Nelken-Terner 1983). MacNeish's research identified 150 potential Archaic sites across the country. His excavation work focused on two sites in the Belize district.

MacNeish's identification of Lowe points provided the first undeniable evidence of preceramic occupation in Belize. More recent work by Robert Rosenswig at San Estevan and Fred Smith (2004) illustrates that a distinctive characteristic of Northern Belize Archaic sites, relative to Archaic deposits elsewhere in Mesoamerica, is the preservation of open-air sites and their stratigraphic juxtaposition below Formative occupations which provides unique potential to understand the transition from foraging to farming. Intriguingly, Northern Belize has one of the highest densities of Archaic sites of anywhere in Mesoamerica (Lohse et al. 2016; Rosenswig 2015). Lisa Lucero and colleague's findings of extinct mega-fauna in the Cara Blanca pools provides a record going back even deeper in time to 30,000 years ago (Lucero et al. 2018).

Challenging the Lesser Significance of Time Periods After the Classic Period: Postclassic, Colonial, and Historical Developments

Another key contribution of research in Northern Belize falls on the other end of Precolumbian Maya history. Research at Northern Belize Postclassic sites dispelled the idea of a denigrated Postclassic society where the Maya declined into obscurity after the Classic period. In 1979, Diane Chase initiated research, which she continued to direct with Arlen Chase until 1985, at Santa Rita, an important Postclassic trading center that was likely the provincial capital of Chetumal. Santa Rita research demonstrated a richness of Postclassic architecture, substantial labor investment, and caches of innovative modeled and painted figurines that illustrate increasing rather than decreasing cultural complexity through time (Chase and Chase 1980).

More recent work by Marilyn Masson at Laguna de On from 1996 to 2003 examined Postclassic life from the perspective of a small rural island settlement distant from governing political centers. In rural Postclassic settlements, as in governing Postclassic centers like Santa Rita, economic production and long-distance trade continued to develop uninterrupted until the time of the Spanish conquest (Masson 2001). Postclassic occupation is now documented at many Northern Belize

archaeological sites illustrating the region's importance in later developments in Maya civilization (e.g., see Walker 2016: Table 1.1).

The site of Lamanai was the first site in the Maya area to provide archaeological evidence for the early post-conquest period. Its two Spanish churches were built in 1544 and 1560 respectively and the destruction of the second church, during a Maya rebellion in 1639-1640 illustrates the resilience of the Maya people (e.g., Graham 2011). Maya resilience is also seen in Maxine Oland's work at Chanlacan on the shores of Progresso Lagoon, which was a pivotal community in the 1546 to 1547 Maya rebellion against the Spanish (Oland 2016).

Northern Belize's long occupation extends through the Historic period with thriving wood extraction industries and extensive Caste War settlements and industries in which multi-ethnic groups of Maya, Mestizo, British, and African people engaged in diverse forms of domination and resistance. Historic archaeology in Northern Belize is uncovering the history of Belize's multi-ethnic past. This was initially seen in the Pendergast's (1982b) study of the 19th century sugar mill at Lamanai. New research by James Garber, Jaime Awe, and Lauren Sullivan (2010) on St. George's Caye examines the birthplace of the nation. Eleanor Harrison-Buck, Brett Houk and colleagues' (2019) studies of British colonists, US Civil War confederates, Creole loggers, and Caste War Maya examines the complex history of multi-ethnic Belize.

Challenging Narratives of the Collapse of Maya Society

Particularly vexing in contemporary Maya archaeology, is the enduring nature of narratives of the collapse of Maya society in 900 CE. In a 2007 review article, James Aimers noted that more than 400 books, chapters, and articles had been written about the question of the Maya collapse. Civilizational-wide collapse narratives were based on early 20th century work at large sites with extensive hieroglyphic texts, which turn out to be precisely those sites that were most likely to suffer at the end of the Classic period. The focus on large sites with extensive hieroglyphic texts produced a false narrative of civilizational-wide collapse. Such narratives

developed before modern, rigorous archaeological research was able to study the full temporal range of settlement types in the Maya area, such as seen in the previously discussed work in Northern Belize. The longevity of human occupation in Northern Belize debunks collapse narratives.

Research at Lamanai, by David Pendergast and Elizabeth Graham was the first to identify continuous occupation at a site from the Preclassic through Postclassic periods and beyond (Graham 2000; Pendergast 1986). Lamanai remains the classic textbook example challenging the idea of a civilizational-wide Maya collapse (e.g., McKillop 2004: 307-308).

However, Lamanai is far from alone in Northern Belize in demonstrating longevity of occupation. At Ka'Kabish, located 10 km from Lamanai, recent research by Helen Haines (2011) provides comparable evidence for PreColumbian Maya longevity.

It is not just near Lamanai, but also across the entirety of Northern Belize that we see significant site longevity across the so-called period of collapse. Anne Pyburn's work at Chau Hiix provides another rich example of site longevity and collapse survival (e.g., Andres and Pyburn 2004). My new research at Aventura, examines a Northern Belize city that thrived during the extended Terminal Classic period (roughly 750-1100 CE), and has a five millennia history spanning Late Archaic forager-horticulturalist, Pre-Columbian Maya, the historic Caste War, and contemporary periods (Robin et al. 2019). Indeed many of the Northern Belize sites previously discussed for their notable findings related to specific periods in Pre-Columbian Maya history have lengthy occupation histories and survived collapse including Colha, Cerro Maya, Santa Rita, and others (see Walker 2016: Table 1.1).

Challenging Hierarchy as the Sole Political Institution of the Classic Maya

Political institutions of hierarchy and divine kingship were the hallmark of the most powerful Classic Maya centers, particularly those larger centers with expansive corpuses of hieroglyphic writing, such as the Classic period cities of the Petén area of Guatemala, and such political institutions that collapsed at the end of

the Classic period. Hierarchical political organization is certainly witnessed at Northern Belize sites, particularly its largest centers (e.g., Houk 2003; Tourtellot et al. 2003). However, a heterarchical form of political organization has emerged as a key organizational principle at many Northern Belize sites (e.g., Potter and King 1995; McAnany 1995; Scarborough et al. 2003). Heterarchy is the ability of organizational units to be unranked or ranked in a number of different ways. Multiple scholars have suggested that heterarchical systems are flexible allowing communities organized in such a way as to possess a greater ability to adapt to change (e.g., Robin 2013; Scarborough and Lucero 2010; Scarborough et al. 2003). Diane Chase and Arlen Chase (2005) use the term heterarchy to describe Early Classic inter-site political relations in the Corozal Bay region between Cerro Maya, Aventura, and Santa Rita. Prior to the Classic period, Robert Rosenswig and Douglas Kennett (2008) describe inter-site political relations in the Late Formative Northern Belize as mid-way between hierarchy and autonomy. Marilyn Masson (2001) identified decentralized political systems in the Postclassic. There is a great deal of variability in how Northern Belize researchers use the terms heterarchy and hierarchy. What is significant about Northern Belize research is that it illustrates that a variety of political forms were present in the Classic period, and that heterarchical political organization, in addition to hierarchical political organization, was common in certain parts of the Maya area during the Classic period.

Conclusion

Archaeological research in Northern Belize has a vast legacy in Maya archaeology. At a basic level, Northern Belize has demonstrated that the region, and Belize, is not a periphery as Debra Walker's (2016) recent edited volume *Perspectives on the Ancient Maya of Chetumal Bay* cogently shows. In so doing, Northern Belize research challenges persistent misconceptions in Maya archaeology. From the rich empirical data of Northern Belize research we can see that the Maya did not collapse in 900 CE and that all periods of Maya history and prehistory reveal rich information about society

and civilization. Northern Belize research demonstrates a number of principles fundamental to the long-term success of Maya communities: the development of a mosaic of sustainable, intensive, multi-crop agricultural regimes, such as raised fields and terraces; the interconnection of communities through trade, exchange, and the development of craft specialization and craft specialized communities; and the diversity of political institutions, particularly heterarchical political institutions, which provided a foundation to adapt to change.

What is the story of the ancient Maya that we learn from the collective research in Northern Belize? It is a story that is “about bigger is not always better”. Relative to the Classic Maya cities of the Petén, the region’s cities are smaller and lack large-scale usage of stela and hieroglyphic writing. However, Northern Belize research illustrates that key innovations in society often arise from smaller centers and household-level practices and interactions. The grand Classic Maya centers of the Petén, which saw their downfall at the end of the Classic period, are not the places to learn about how Maya society was able to thrive in the face of social, political, and environmental challenges. If we want to understand how a society operates, we must look at smaller centers, the household level of action, interaction, and innovation, and communities with lengthy histories. We also must include the complete range of people in society, from commoners to elites, in our discussions of society. One of the standout aspects of Northern Belize research is how it address the complete range of people in Maya society. The ancient Maya of Northern Belize show us that social systems that avoid extremes of wealth and power, managed resources effectively, and developed connections between households and communities, allowed for a more long-lived and sustainable world, a lesson that we could certainly learn in our society today.

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