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Late Postclassic Lowland Maya Archaeology

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The archaeology of the Late Postclassic lowland Maya (ca. A.D. 1200–1517) is summarized and reviewed. The history of past research is outlined, and investigations on topics of major scholarly concern are discussed. The current data allow us to present an approximate reconstruction of the events and processes that characterize the period, although the information on many areas and topics is still fragmentary. Research in Maya archaeology has focused heavily on the more spectacular developments of earlier periods, creating the impression that the last few centuries of the prehispanic era were a time of disorganization and decline. New data and interpretations indicate that the Late Postclassic was a dynamic period in which the lowland Maya were moving in new directions, restructuring their society and worldview.

KEY WORDS: Archaeology; Maya lowlands; Late Postclassic.

INTRODUCTION

When the Spanish arrived in Yucatán in the early sixteenth century they encountered a culture far more advanced than they had seen in the Caribbean. Instead of petty chiefdoms and tribes living in small villages and towns, they discovered a highly stratified society living in urban communities with pyramids and palaces made of stone masonry, decorated with elaborate stucco reliefs and stone carvings. One of the first communities they sighted was Zama (Tulúm-Tancah), on the central east coast of Quintana Roo, which they likened to

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Seville; such a comparison indicates their realization that, at long last, they had truly found a new world.

The process of exploration and discovery that began with the arrival of the Spanish continues to unfold. Unfortunately, the Spanish failed to realize that the people they had encountered, and later subjugated, were the heirs to one of the most sophisticated cultural traditions in the world. Many of the great achievements of Classic Maya civilization had dissipated by the sixteenth century, and several centuries were to pass before the world began to appreciate the full splendor of the Maya past. Still, much of the complexity of Maya culture was alive when the Spanish arrived, and a few Spaniards made a significant effort to record this cultural heritage. Their efforts constitute one of the main building blocks in our reconstruction of their culture and the subsequent impact of European conquest and colonization.

The study of Late Postclassic and Early Colonial Maya society has relied heavily on early colonial sources, which constitute a body of ethnohistoric material comparable to that available for the Aztec and Inca. The best overviews of Maya life and society at the time of contact can be found in the works of Fray Diego de Landa (orig. 1566; Tozzer, 1941) and Ralph Roys (1943, 1957, 1965). More recent studies, dealing primarily with the postcontact period, include those by Manuela Cristina García Bernal (1978), Nancy Farriss (1984), Inga Clendinnen (1987), Grant Jones (1989), and Sergio Quezada (1990). These data have been augmented by extensive prehispanic and historic archaeological research and supplemented by modern ethnographic and linguistic investigations.

Although much of the research has focused on the reconstruction of Maya life, and the processes that led to the Postclassic period, recent efforts have also focused on the effects of the Spanish conquest and colonization of the Maya. This work, which has relied heavily on ethnohistoric archival research and a growing number of field projects at early colonial sites, is still in its early stages. Nonetheless, it is already yielding new data on early colonial life that are not available in traditional historic texts, including fresh perspectives on the processes of acculturation and resistance to Spanish rule. These data are also establishing important links between past and present Maya society, and a more substantive processual vision of the continuity of Maya culture is now emerging.

The present survey focuses on the archaeology of the Late Postclassic period, and draws on ethnohistoric materials as well. The first section summarizes the history of research; although not central to the prehispanic thrust of this survey, I also include a brief section on the archaeology of the early colonial period. The second section focuses on topics that have been the subject of recent investigations, and the third section provides an overview of the cultural history and processes of the period of study.

HISTORY OF RESEARCH

Archaeology of the Late Postclassic Period (A.D. 1200–1517)

The archaeology of the Lowland Postclassic Maya has been the subject of several recent conferences and volumes (Chase and Rice, 1985; Rivera and Cuidad, 1986; Sabloff and Andrews, 1986; see also Sabloff, 1990); taken together, they offer a broad overview of the current state of our knowledge of Postclassic Maya culture. A few works have focused specifically on the history of research (Benavides Castillo, 1984, 1988; Hammond, 1983a,b; McKillop and Awe, 1983; Robles Castellanos and Andrews, 1986; Vail, 1988).

Northern Lowlands. Lowland Maya Postclassic archaeology has always been overshadowed by research on the spectacular remains of the Classic period and its monumental cities and rich historic texts. This pattern began in the nineteenth century, when the first explorers were drawn primarily to Classic period sites. The only major Postclassic sites visited by John L. Stephens and Frederick Catherwood in their famous travels of 1840–1842 were Chichén Itzá, Mayapán, and Tulúm (Fig. 1) (Stephens, 1842, 1843). While the large Terminal Classic and Early Postclassic city of Chichén Itzá eventually became the focus of much research, little attention was paid to later sites. For the most part, these efforts were confined to the east coast region. These included preliminary explorations of Postclassic remains at El Meco, and several sites on the islands of Cozumel, Cancún, and Isla Mujeres [cf. Andrews IV and Andrews, (1975) for a history of early archaeological exploration of the Quintana Roo coast].

During the first half of the twentieth century, research on the Late Postclassic sites continued to focus almost exclusively on the east coast. The first major effort was mounted by the Carnegie Institution of Washington, and involved a detailed study of the ruins of Tulúm and a survey of other sites along the coast (Lothrop, 1924). For the first time, this study defined the east coast as a distinctive cultural province during the late Postclassic period. Several other explorers also visited many east coast sites during the early years of the century, adding important data to the Carnegie survey (cf. Andrews IV and Andrews, 1975). In 1937 several Mexican scholars of the *Expedición Científica Mexicana* conducted an extensive survey of ruins throughout Quintana Roo, reporting a large number of additional Late Postclassic sites, as well as new data on several previously reported ones (Escalona Ramos, 1946; Fernández, 1945a). Following the survey, Miguel Angel Fernández spent four seasons, from 1938 to 1940, conducting excavations and restoration work at Tulúm (Fernández, 1941, 1945b, c; Fernández *et. al.*, 1945). With the exception of limited excavations by Fernández, all of the work on the coast was of a survey nature, with the primary objective of recording the large amounts of standing architecture that have sur-

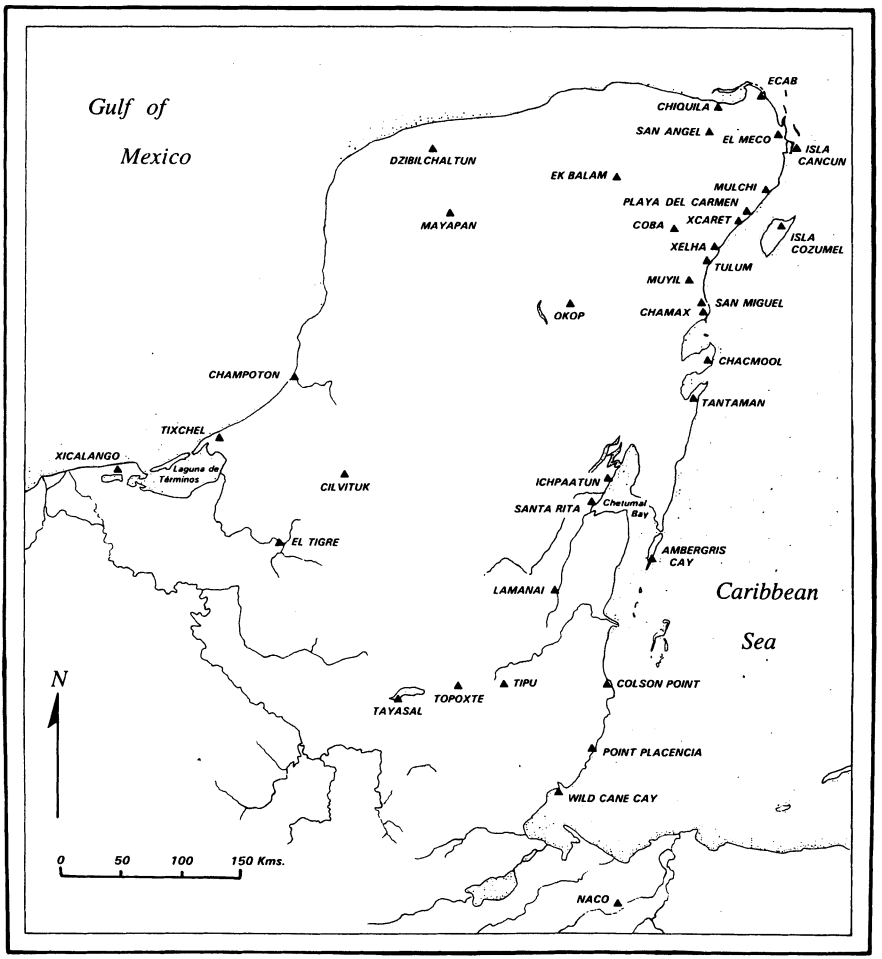

Fig. 1. Major Late Postclassic archaeological sites of the Maya Lowlands.

vived in this area. Thus, aside from the general understanding that most of this architecture dated to the last period before the conquest (a point first made to Stephens in 1843), no chronological data were available for the area prior to 1960.

Another major focus of Postclassic activity was identified in southwestern Campeche in a survey conducted by E. W. Andrews IV in 1939–1940 (1943). He reported several late sites at Lake Cilvituk and along the Candelaria River; one of these was El Tigre, which later research suggested was the Late Postclassic and historic town of Itzamkanac [Piña Chan and Pavón Abreu, 1961; cf.

also Ochoa and Vargas Pacheco (1985) and Pincemín (1989) for more recent surveys of the Candaleria region].

The first excavation projects to focus on late lowland Postclassic sites took place in the 1950s. From 1949 to 1955, the Carnegie Institution of Washington undertook a major program of research at Mayapán, the last major Postclassic capital of northwest Yucatán. The results of this research were published in a long list of Carnegie publications and two major final reports. The work included a detailed map and settlement pattern study of the site, studies of the architecture, ceramics, and artifacts, and an in-depth analysis of the historic sources of Late Postclassic Yucatán (Pollock *et al.*, 1962; Proskouriakoff, 1955; Smith, 1971). Clifford Brown is currently conducting a mapping and test-pitting study of Mayapán, in an attempt to discern patterns of internal social organization at the site. As a result of these efforts, Mayapán remains the most heavily studied Late Postclassic site to date in the Maya lowlands.

The east coast also saw further work during the 1950s. The lack of chronological data was addressed by William Sanders, who conducted a survey and test-pitting of sites throughout Quintana Roo in 1954 and 1955. This work resulted in the location, description, and testing of many sites, excavations at Tulúm, Tancah, Ichpaatún, and Calderitas, and the first initial ceramic sequence for the region (Sanders, 1955, 1960). Another project, initiated by E. Wyllys Andrews IV in 1955 and 1956, and completed by Anthony Andrews in 1972, produced a detailed study of the architecture of Xcaret and several other Late Postclassic sites on the central east coast; this research also resulted in the identification of Xcaret as the Late Postclassic and early colonial port of Polé (Andrews and Andrews, 1975).

The development of the east coast into an international resort has prompted many projects over the last 20 years, most of them at sites whose major occupation was during the Late Postclassic [see Robles and Andrews (1986) for a detailed account of the research between 1970 and 1982; also Andrews (1985)]. This work has included surveys of Cozumel Island (Freidel and Sabloff, 1984; Sabloff and Rathje, 1975b), the central coast from Cancún to Playa del Cármen (Andrews, 1986), and from Tulúm to Ascención Bay (Andrews, 1983b), the east coast of the Xkalak península (Gallareta *et al.*, 1989), and the Mexican coast of Chetumal Bay (Hamilton, 1989). To date, 136 sites, 98 of them with Postclassic occupations, have been reported along the coast and offshore islands of Quintana Roo (Andrews and Vail, 1989). Excavations, often accompanied by the consolidation of standing architecture, have been undertaken at several of these: El Meco (Andrews and Robles, 1986), several sites on Cancún Island (Mayer Guala, 1990; Vargas Pacheco, 1978), Playa del Cármen [the prehispanic site of Xamanhá (González de la Mata, 1984; Márquez Morfín, 1982)], Xcaret [or Polé (Con, 1991; Terrones González, 1990)], Xelhá, [or Xala (Canché Manzanero, 1992)], Tancah-Tulúm [or Zama (Barrera Rubio, 1977, 1985; Miller

1982; Velásquez Valadez, 1976, 1985)], and Muyil/Chunyaxché (Witschey 1988, 1991). Excavations have also been conducted on Cozumel Island, at La Expedicíon, Buenavista, and San Gervasio (Freidel and Sabloff, 1984; Robles Castellanos, 1986a, b; Sabloff and Rathje, 1975b; Sierra Sosa, 1991; Vargas de la Peña, 1992). Many of the buildings at San Gervasio have been consolidated. Consolidation has also been carried out at Tamul (the Sheraton Hotel site) on Cancún Island, and at Chacmool (between Espíritu Santo and Ascención bays), but the excavation results have not yet been published.

The east coast has the highest concentration of Late Postclassic sites in the lowlands, and the north and west coasts were sparsely populated during this period. Several surveys of the Campeche and Yucatán coasts (Andrews, 1977; Eaton, 1978; Garza T. de González and Kurjack, 1980; Jiménez Valdés, 1984, 1987; Ruz Lhuillier, 1969; see also Ball, 1985a) have yielded 17 sites with Late Postclassic occupations. These include several sites on the Xicalango peninsula, Isla del Cármen, Tixchel, Champotón, and Campeche on the west coast, and Emal, El Cuyo, Chiquilá (the prehispanic port of Conil), Vista Alegre, and Yuukluuk (Holbox Island) on the north coast. Limited excavations have been conducted at several sites on the Xicalango peninsula (Jiménez Valdés, 1984, 1987; Matheny, 1970; Ochoa and Vargas Pacheco, 1987).

Beyond the city of Mayapán, Late Postclassic remains are relatively scarce in the interior of Yucatán. Surveys and excavations at Classic sites often reveal traces of a Late Postclassic overlay, though systematic investigations of this period have not been carried out. Substantial late occupations have been reported at the Classic sites of Mérida, Dzibilchaltún, Izamal, Ek Balám, Okop, Aké, and Cobá, but the work at most of those sites has focused primarily on earlier remains. A recent survey of the province of Ah Kin Chel, in eastern Yucatán, has also located several sites with Late Postclassic occupations (Kepecs, 1990). Sporadic traces of Late Postclassic remains have also been reported from sites in southern Campeche and Quintana Roo (Ball, 1985b; Fry, 1985; Harrison, 1979). The paucity of remains of late sites can be attributed in large part to the Spanish conquest. Many of the towns and cities of the contact period became colonial settlements, and most of their structures were demolished and recycled into colonial buildings. Thus, sites with remains of Late Postclassic architecture are found in rural areas where the Spanish had little impact (the east coast being the prime example). Several sites in the interior of eastern Yucatán and Northern Quintana Roo, such as Sacboh, Punta Laguna, and San Angel, still have standing buildings of the Late Postclassic period. The latter site also has the remains of several well-preserved mural paintings (Taube and Gallareta, 1989).

Southern Lowlands. During the first half of the twentieth century, the culture history of the Maya lowlands was widely viewed as having two major components: a flowering Classic culture in the southern city states, and its eventual collapse in the eighth and ninth centuries, followed by the emergence

of larger, more centralized Postclassic states in the north (Chichén Itzá and Mayapán). This dichotomy received wide currency in the literature in Sylvanus Morley's notion of the "old and new empires." This oversimplified scenario was based almost entirely on negative data: a perceived paucity of Classic remains in the north and a near-total absence of any known Postclassic centers in the southern lowlands. Subsequent research has substantially altered this picture, particularly in the southern lowlands, where considerable new data on the Postclassic period have been uncovered.

When Hernán Cortés traveled through the Guatemalan Petén in 1524, on a trip from Central Mexico to Honduras, he encountered a dynamic "Itzá kingdom" known as Tayasal on the islands and shores of Lake Petén Itzá. This Late Postclassic Maya polity remained outside of the sphere of Spanish control until 1697, following a series of *entradas* and military campaigns that led to its subjugation. Archaeologists have searched for the remains of Tayasal since the 1920s. An initial Carnegie investigation by Carl Guthe in 1921 and 1922 focused on the Tayasal peninsula, opposite the island of Flores, but recovered mainly Classic period remains (Guthe, 1921, 1922). The next expedition, led by George Cowgill of Harvard University in 1959, revealed Postclassic ceramics on the Tayasal peninsula and on the island of Flores. This led Cowgill to endorse the widely held view (derived from historic sources) that the late "Itzá kingdom" of Tayasal was centered on the island of Flores and nearby islands and shores of Lake Petén Itzá (Cowgill, 1963).

Another major center of Postclassic activity in the Petén was located at Topoxté, which lies on four islands on Lake Yaxhá, east of Lake Petén Itzá. This site contains the remains of several partially standing monumental structures whose architecture closely resembles that of Late Postclassic northern Yucatán. The site was first reported in 1831 and subsequently visited by several archaeologists. In 1958–1960 William Bullard conducted a detailed survey and text excavations at the site and established that the main period of occupation was during the Late Postclassic period. Many of the late ceramics bore a close resemblance to types from Mayapán and the east coast, which led Bullard to conclude that the area had close ties to the north during this final phase of the prehispanic period [see also Johnson (1985) for a detailed map of Topoxté made in 1974]. Several years later, Bullard made a study of ceramic collections from several sites in the north-central Petén and adjoining western Belize and established a preliminary Postclassic sequence for the region (1973).

In 1971, William Coe surveyed and excavated several sites on the Tayasal peninsula. This work was continued in 1977 and 1979 by Arlen Chase and resulted in a ceramic sequence for the region, from Preclassic to Historic times. (A. F. Chase, 1983, 1984, 1985a, b). While this research located a scattering of Postclassic ceramics at several locations, the bulk of the sites on the peninsula yielded remains from earlier periods. The paucity of Late Postclassic remains

led Chase to propose that Tayasal was not located at Lake Petén Itzá but, rather, at Topoxté (1976, 1982, 1985b). This idea has been challenged by other scholars working in the region (Jones *et al.*, 1981) and has not been widely accepted.

Between 1973 and 1981, Prudence and Don Rice conducted an extensive program of archaeological research throughout the Central Petén Lakes district, known as the Central Petén Historical Ecology Project (CPHEP). This project focused on Lakes Yaxhá, Sacnab, Macanché, Salpetén, Quezil, and Petenxil and their surrounding areas. The work included detailed settlement pattern studies of the lake basins and excavations at Topoxté, Macanché, Muralla de León, and several other sites. The research led to a revised ceramic sequence for the region and demonstrated that strong continuities existed between the Postclassic cultures of the Petén and those of the earlier Classic period, thus challenging the notion that the Petén Postclassic was primarily the result of migrations from northern Yucatán. The picture that is now emerging is one that views Postclassic developments as a mixture of indigenous development and waves of influence and migration from the north (D. S. Rice, 1976, 1986, 1988; and P. M. Rice, 1980a, b, 1981, 1982a, b, 1984a, b, 1990; P. M. Rice, 1986, 1987; D. S. Rice P. M. Rice and D. S. Rice, 1985).

Research in Belize in recent years has also added important new data on the Postclassic of the Southern Lowlands. Excavations have uncovered traces of Postclassic remains at several Classic sites in the interior, as well as major occupations at Lamanai (Loten, 1985; Pendergast, 1985, 1986b, 1990) and Tipú (Graham and Bennett, 1989; Jones *et al.* 1986; Jones and Kautz, 1985) and at many sites along the coast and offshore cays.

Before 1970 little was known about the archaeology of coastal Belize. Investigations over the last 20 years have revealed that the coast and offshore islands were an area of intense activity during the Postclassic. To date, Late Postclassic occupations have been identified at more than 30 sites (Andrews and Vail, 1989; McKillop and Healy, 1989; Vail, 1988).

For many years, the only known Postclassic site in Belize was that of Santa Rita on Chetumal Bay, which Thomas Gann excavated around the turn of the century (1900, 1911, 1914–1916, 1918). Later, limited excavations were conducted by several investigators in the 1970s (for a summary see D. Z. Chase, 1982) and a major program of research was undertaken by Diane and Arlen Chase between 1979 and 1985 (D. Z. Chase, 1981, 1982, 1985; D. Z. Chase and A. F. Chase, 1986, 1988). These excavations have revealed an uninterrupted sequence of occupation at the site from Preclassic to Postclassic times and indicate that Santa Rita was a major regional center during Late Postclassic times. The Chases also argue that Santa Rita was the site of the contact period community of Chetumal, though this identification is still unresolved (cf. Jones, 1989, pp. 280–282, 337).

A number of other sites on the Belizean coast of Chetumal Bay were also

occupied during the Late Postclassic (cf. Sidrys, 1983), including the site of Cerros, which was a regional center in Preclassic times (Walker, 1991). Farther south, on the central coast, major areas of Postclassic activity have been identified at Colson Point and Point Placencia (Graham, 1983, 1985, 1989; McKinnon, 1985, 1989a, b, 1990). At least 12 Late Postclassic sites have been reported from the offshore cays. Two of these, on Ambergris and Wild Cane Cays, have been the subject of excavations and have revealed evidence of extensive trading activities (Graham and Pendergast, 1989; Jackson and McKillop, 1987; McKillop, 1987). For more details and sources on Belizean coastal Postclassic investigations, the reader is referred to the works by Vail (1988) and McKillop and Healy (1989).

Finally, in the far southwestern periphery of the Maya area, historic texts document a major Late Postclassic trading center at Naco, in northwestern Honduras, which was active at the time of the Spanish conquest. This site has been identified and excavated by Anthony Wonderly (1981, 1985; Henderson, 1984).

Archaeology of the Early Colonial Period

Early colonial historic sources and archeological investigations represent an important component in the study of the contact period Maya. The latter are particularly important, as they document many continuities of prehispanic Maya life into the colonial period, and provide a wide range of data that is not available in the historic record.

The term "historic archaeology" in the Maya area is generally applied to research on sites and remains that postdate the time of Spanish contact (Andrews, 1981). The label is somewhat of a misnomer, as the prehispanic Maya were a literate society with written historic records going back to the Early Classic period (Houston, 1989).

The archaeology of early colonial sites in the Maya lowlands is still in its infancy. A preliminary framework, with a chronology and site topology, was published by this author in 1981 (cf. also papers in the collection edited by Benavides Castillo and Andrews, 1985). Much of the fieldwork conducted to date has focused on religious structures and to a lesser extent, on the surrounding communities. As I have recently summarized this research elsewhere (Andrews, 1991), the following comments focus only on a few salient features of the research.

Many prehispanic Maya communities continued to be occupied long after the arrival of the Spanish. As noted above, native buildings were dismantled and incorporated into colonial structures, which in turn were often replaced by later construction. Thus, the remains of many contact communities lay buried under modern cities and towns. Maya communities in rural areas fared somewhat better, depending on the outcome of Spanish policies of missionization and

resettlement. The inhabitants of some communities were resettled early in larger towns under Spanish control, leaving behind relatively intact native communities. Alternately, missions were established in many native towns; some survive as contemporary communities, while others were eventually abandoned. As a consequence of these processes, early colonial archaeology has focused primarily on the remains of abandoned communities, mostly in Yucatán and Belize.

Chapels and churches are the most prominent features of early colonial settlements, and represent an important setting for the study of early colonial life and of the process of acculturation. As many of the surviving chapels and churches lie on the frontiers of the Spanish domain, they also provide a context for examining the tensions that accompanied the acculturation process, the dynamics of cultural interaction on the frontiers, and the nature of the tenuous European control over the native Maya (Graham *et al.*, 1989).

The study of these structures is mainly of a descriptive nature. To date, over 30 have been located and identified, but only a handful have been excavated (Andrews, 1991). Excavated sites include the chapels of Xcaret (Andrews and Andrews, 1975; Con, 1991; Hanson, 1990) and Tancah (Miller, 1982) on the coast of Quintana Roo and the chapels and churches at Lamanai (Pendergast, 1975, 1981, 1984, 1986a, b) and Tipú (Graham *et al.* 1985; Graham and Bennett, 1989; Jones and Kautz, 1985; Jones *et al.*, 1986) in northern Belize. At the latter two sites, excavations have also been conducted in the surrounding residential areas. Excavations have also been conducted at several early Colonial structures at Maní and Hunactí, in Yucatán (Hanson 1991).

Research at sites other than early mission communities has been limited to a few projects conducted within the last decade. The first systematic study of colonial settlement patterns was recently completed by Rani Alexander, who conducted an intensive survey of several colonial settlements in the Yaxcabá region of central Yucatán. This research, which was heavily supplemented by archival research, focused on the articulation of rural households into the larger colonial economy (Alexander, 1991). Three other studies, currently under way, are investigating the early colonial communities of Tecoh and Ek Balám, in Yucatán, and San Pedro, on Ambergris Cay, Belize. Tecoh, which was abandoned early in the Colonial period, has the well-preserved remains of a church and several residences; owing to its abandonment early in the Colonial period, it stands as one of the few intact Colonial communities of northern Yucatán (Luis Millet, personal communication, 1989). Ek Balám, a large prehispanic site in eastern Yucatán, also has the remains of a chapel and a surrounding colonial community dating to the sixteenth century; excavation of this community began in 1992 (C. Hanson and W. Ringle, personal communication, 1992). Farther south, David Pendergast and Elizabeth Graham (1991) have recently uncovered the remains of a previously unreported early colonial settlement underneath the modern town of San Pedro on Ambergris Cay. Future work

at all these sites promises important data on early colonial communities and on the impact of Spanish colonial rule on native Maya life.

Among the most important recent investigations is a study of a large collection of colonial ceramics recovered from the site of "El Olimpo," a historic building on the main plaza of Mérida, which was torn down in 1974. The final report from this project offers an exhaustive synthesis of available data on colonial ceramics and provides a benchmark for future studies (Burgos Villanueva, 1990).

TOPICAL RESEARCH

Political Organization

Research on the late political structure of the Maya lowlands began in the late nineteenth century, and much of it has focused on the identification of the provinces, or *kuchcabaloob*, that existed at the time of contact (Fig. 2) (for a history of this research, see Andrews, 1984). Despite this prolonged interest, fundamental questions about the provinces remain. For example, it is not clear whether they should be classified as native states, primitive city-states, confederations of towns, or chiefdoms. Moreover, the total number of provinces still eludes us; estimates vary from 16 to 24. Finally, the reconstruction of their boundaries has proven to be a difficult task. It is now clear that the internal sociopolitical organization and resources of the provinces varied considerably and that their boundaries were in a constant state of flux owing to endless internecine conflicts.

It is not known when the kuchkabaloob emerged as autonomous units. The general configuration of the provinces at the time of the conquest was evidently in place at the beginning of the Late Postclassic period, when several of them joined together to form a confederate or joint government known as *multepal*, based at the city of Mayapán. It is thus likely that many of the provinces evolved out of earlier polities of the Classic period (Andrews, 1984; Robles and Andrews, 1986).

The most widely accepted reconstruction of the political geography of contact period Yucatán is that of Roys (1943, 1957), who identified 16 provinces (the island of Cozumel, which appears to have been autonomous, could be considered a 17th province). Roys was able to outline the political structure and approximate boundaries for most of the provinces in the northern and western regions of the peninsula, for which there is substantial documentation. There is considerably less information on the provinces to the east and south, and little is known about their internal organization or the extent of their territories.

Roys identified three types of political organization in the provinces. The

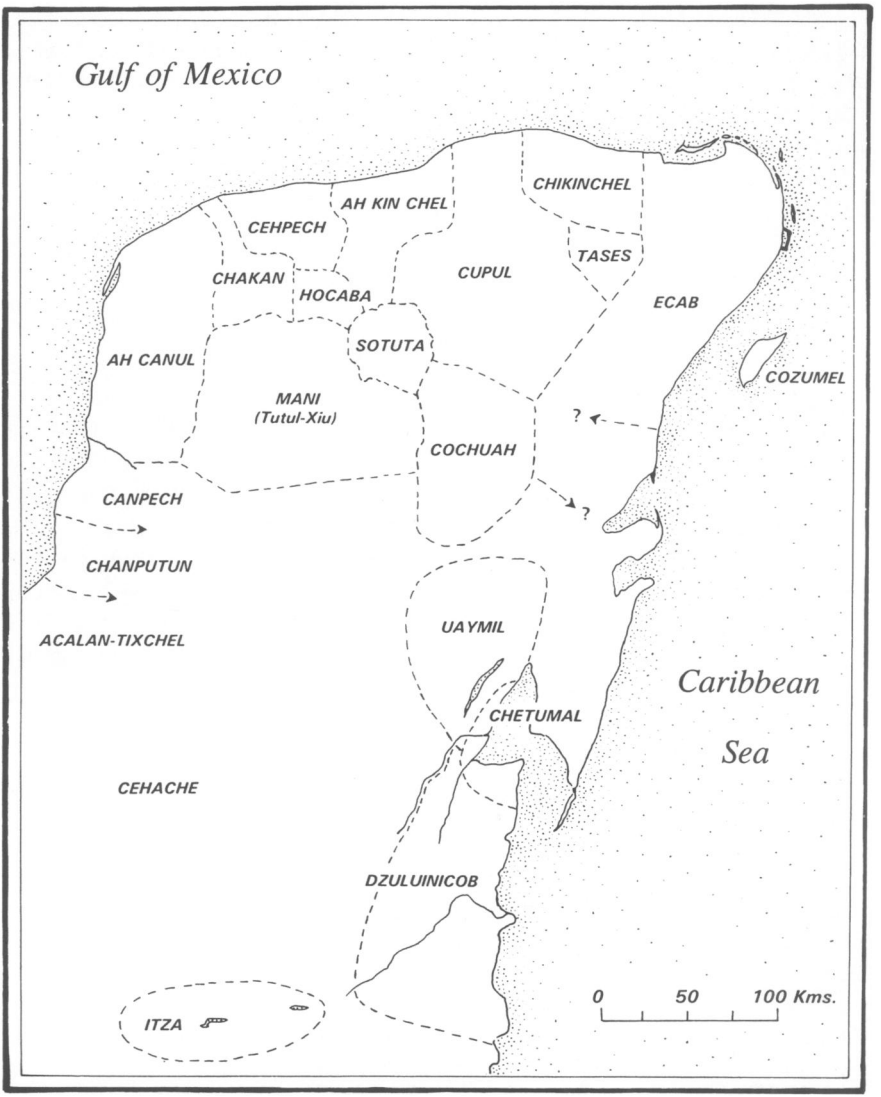

Fig. 2 Map of the contact-period provinces of Yucatán, after Roys (1957), with revisions by Andrews (1984) and Jones (1989). For an alternative reconstruction, see Quezada (1990).

first was a highly centralized form of government, in which the province was ruled by a hereditary *halach uinic*; beneath him were the rulers of individual towns, known as *batabs*, who paid him a moderate tribute. In the second type, there was no single territorial ruler, and power resided with individual batabs, who often belonged to the same lineage. The third type of organization is the least well defined and seems to have been made up of loosely allied groups of towns (Roys, 1957, p. 6).

The key individual in this whole system was the batab, who was the chief executive, judicial, and military officer of each town and who ruled over the local council. The batabs later became the *caciques* of the colonial period. Maya towns were divided into *cuchteloob*, or *barrios*, which were administered by *ahcuchcabs* (Roys, 1957, pp. 6–7).

In the last decade several studies have revised or added new data to Roys' reconstruction. The boundaries of several provinces have been revised, most notably those of the province of Cupul; Roys had defined Cupul as a landlocked province, but new data indicates that its boundaries reached the north coast (Andrews, 1984). In her extensive study of colonial Maya life, Farriss has noted that Roys' scheme of provincial government was far too simplified; most scholars would likely agree with her that political organization was more complex and fluid and that there was a much more extensive range of variation among the provinces, which ran from highly centralized rule to casual aggregations of smaller units (1984, p. 148).

In the same vein, but in a radical departure from traditional views, Sergio Quezada has argued in a recent doctoral dissertation (1990) that the configuration of political units was markedly different from that proposed by Roys. Quezada's scheme favors a more atomistic reconstruction of smaller territorial units based largely on lineage affiliations of town rulers. This town-based model is far more intricate than the traditional reconstruction, and is based on new data from archival sources.

The weakest area of Roys' research is the southern lowlands, as he had little historic information on that region. A recent study by Jones (1989), based on previously untapped archival data, provides new information on southern Quintana Roo, northern Belize, and the northern Petén. A major contribution of this work is the identification of the previously unknown province of Dzuilinicob, which incorporated most of northern Belize (and the southern half of Roys' province of Chetumal). This province, of which Tipú appears to have been the main town in colonial times, maintained close ties with the Petén Itzá of the Central Lakes region. As noted above, archaeological research at Tipú and Lamanai has added an important dimension to our understanding of this province at the time of contact (cf. Graham *et al.*, 1989). Jones' study also brings the provinces of Chetumal and Uaymil into much sharper focus, and now

we have a much better picture of the major towns and territorial domains of those provinces. In research currently under way, Jones is examining the history and sociopolitical organization of the Petén Itzá, who maintained the last autonomous Maya polity until the end of the seventeenth century (Jones, 1992).

Settlement Patterns and Demography

Research on the settlement patterns of the Late Postclassic period is limited to a small number of regions and sites. Detailed studies of Postclassic settlements have been conducted at Mayapán (Proskouriakoff, 1962; Smith, 1962), Cozumel Island (Freidel, 1976; Freidel and Sabloff, 1984; Sierra Sosa, 1991), Cancún Island (Mayer Guala, 1990; Vargas Pacheco, 1978), Santa Rita (D. Z. Chase, 1982; D. Z. Chase and A. F. Chase, 1988), and Topoxté (Bullard, 1970; Johnson, 1984). Regional survey data are also available for the east coast (see studies cited under History of Research, above) and the Central Lakes region of the Guatemalan Petén (for a summary, see D. S. Rice, 1986). David Freidel has published an excellent overview of Late Postclassic settlement patterns in northern Yucatán (1981).

Most late Maya settlements were densely nucleated communities ranging in size from tiny hamlets to medium-sized urban centers. Spanish accounts at the time of contact report numerous settlements with several thousands of houses, which would suggest that some communities had very large populations. While the accuracy of the Spanish accounts is somewhat suspect (they had a vested interest in exaggerating their figures), archaeological research does indicate that a few communities had substantial numbers of inhabitants; estimates are available for the following sites:

Settlement	Population estimate	Source
Mayapán	8,400	Sanders (1963, p. 228)
	11,000–12,000	A. L. Smith (1962, p. 211)
	21,000	D. Z. Chase (1990, p. 206)
Cozumel Island	8,000–10,000	Freidel and Sabloff (1984, p. 178)
Santa Rita Corozal	6,840	D. Z. Chase (1990, p. 211)
	8,000	D. Z. Chase and A. F. Chase (1988, p. 67)

Historical and archaeological data suggest that there were several other communities (or groups of communities) of comparable size—in the 5000 to 10,000 range—in the northern lowlands at the time of contact. Spanish accounts and census data indicate such concentrations at several towns in the interior of northern Yucatán; among these are Chauaca, Maní, Motul, Sotuta, and the areas around Izamal and Valladolid. Similar concentrations are evident along the Quintana Roo coast, particularly around the areas of Chiquilá, (Conil), El Meco–Cancún, Puerto Morelos–Mulchi, Playa del Cármen–Xcaret (Xamanhá-Polé), Xelhá (Xala), Tancah–Tulúm (Zama), Muyil/Chunyaxché, and Tamalcab–La

Iglesia–Ichpaatún on Chetumal Bay. Populations of similar size were also likely concentrated around Xicalango and the Laguna de Terminos, at Tixchel and Champotón, on the Campeche coast, in the Central Lakes region of the Petén, and around Naco in northwest Honduras.

The actual population of the Maya Lowlands at the time of the Spanish arrival may have been much larger than the archaeological and historical evidence suggests. Many communities had large numbers of perishable domestic structures that leave little or no trace in the archaeological record, and it is most likely that there were substantial dispersed populations living in perishable structures in many regions (D. Z. Chase, 1990; D. S. Rice, personal communication, 1992). Moreover, there are many indications that epidemics due to Spanish contact may have had a significant impact on the population of the Maya lowlands; historic sources, mostly census and tribute lists of the mid to late sixteenth century, clearly record a much reduced population. A fuller discussion of the demographic picture at the time of contact can be found in the extensive study by Sherwood Cook and Woodrow Borah, who estimate a population of 800,000 for Yucatán in 1528; this estimate is for the modern Mexican states of Yucatán, Campeche, and Quintana Roo and does not include Tabasco, lowland Chiapas, the Petén, or Belize. As the authors note, epidemics brought on by earlier contacts with the Spanish may have already begun to affect lower population levels; thus, their estimate is a conservative one (Cook and Borah, 1974, pp. 38–39).

Community Organization

Late Maya settlement pattern research has focused heavily on the study of community organization. Ethnohistoric sources suggest two different models for the organization of Late Postclassic communities: (1) a concentric model, in which the administrative center and elite residences were clustered at the center of the settlement, with lower class residences spreading out into the periphery; and (2) a sector, or "*barrio*," model, in which a community is divided into wards, each with its own administrative, elite, and lower-class residential clusters. The concentric model has been widely applied to numerous sites of the Classic period, though this has been challenged by several investigators (for a discussion, see D. Z. Chase and A. F. Chase, 1988). The growing body of settlement pattern data from Late Postclassic sites appears to adhere more closely to the sector model. This type of organization is evident at San Gervasio, on Cozumel Island, as well as at many east coast sites, and at Santa Rita Corozal, in Belize. Several sites in the Central Petén also fit the model. Even Mayapán, long considered an example of the concentric model, appears to fit the sector model better (D. Z. Chase, 1986, p. 366).

At many of the larger Late Postclassic sites, the organization of the settle-

ment into barrios fits well with ethnohistoric descriptions of lineage-based residential neighborhoods, or cuchteloob. Many of the wards are centered around small plaza groups which served as the administrative and residential seats of the acuchcabs; they are in turn surrounded by clusters of smaller residential units. At Mayapán and San Gervasio, several of the barrio groups are connected by small intrasite *sacbes*, or causeways; these may reflect ties between the elite lineages who ruled the community. Sacbes were a common feature of the Classic period but were rare in Late Postclassic times.

Architecture

The corpus of data on late Maya architecture has grown considerably over the last three decades, as has the variation in types of buildings found throughout the lowlands. Most of the surviving architecture is concentrated at Mayapán, along the coast of Quintana Roo and Chetumal Bay, and in northern Belize and the Central Petén. The above-cited settlement studies contain a broad sampling of the range of architectural variation, as well as detailed discussions of structure typology and function.

Although the Late Postclassic Maya built pyramids, palaces, temples, shrines, and a wide range of residential structures, these were on a smaller scale and employed cruder construction techniques than the structures of earlier periods. The basic construction technique was one of crudely cut masonry blocks covered with many layers of stucco, which were painted with an array of vivid colors, including red, blue, green, yellow, and black. Facades often included moldings, relief sculptures, and stucco decorations, and inner rooms were occasionally decorated with elaborate murals. Roofing techniques ranged from gabled thatch, to flat beam-and-mortar, to vaulting. Late Maya architecture incorporates several structure types and features that are uncommon or absent in earlier Classic period construction. These include the ubiquitous colonnaded hallways, round structures, open-front "tandem" residential structures, balustraded stairways, doorways with inset upper panels, and a variety of sculptural motifs, such as serpent balustrades and columns, stucco idols, and high-relief depictions of the so-called "diving god." Many of these features are found in the Early Postclassic period at Chichén Itzá, and are also characteristic of Postclassic sites in Central Mexico.

Architectural studies of the Late Postclassic have used the studies at Mayapán (Proskouriakoff, 1962; Smith, 1962) as a baseline for comparative research. However, it is now widely recognized that there is considerable more variety at east coast sites. Consequently, there have been several attempts to set up architectural typologies of east coast structures. Most of this work has focused on structures at Cozumel (Leventhal, 1974; Freidel, 1976; Freidel and Cliff, 1978; Freidel and Sabloff, 1984; Sierra Sosa, 1991; Vargas de la Peña, 1992),

Xcaret (Andrews and Andrews, 1975), Cancún (Vargas Pacheco, 1978), and Muyil/Chunyaxché (Witschey, 1991); in addition, a general comparative study of east coast structure types has been conducted by Brian Sullivan (1988).

The above typologies are based largely on formal criteria (groundplans, size, associated features and furnishings, and location) and, to a lesser degree, on functional categories. Taken together, they provide a comprehensive framework for the study of east coast architecture. As excavations uncover more about the activities that took place inside these buildings, it will be possible to increase our range of functional categories, and integrate those categories with formal criteria in a broader framework.

There is a definite need for a general topology that would incorporate Late Postclassic architecture from across the lowlands. Such a study would include the architecture from Mayapán; isolated sites in the interior of Yucatán, the east coast sites, and sites in northern Belize and the Central Petén.

Mural Art

Most of the surviving mural art of the Late Postclassic period is found in the east coast region. The most famous murals are those of Tulúm, which were originally recorded by Carnegie (Lothrop, 1924) and the Mexican Government (Fernández, 1945; Fernández *et al.*, 1945). These share many features with murals uncovered by Gann (1900) at Santa Rita Corozal, and together they form part of a distinctive art tradition that Donald Robertson (1970) has called the International Style of the Postclassic.

Several studies in the last two decades have added new data and interpretations to the corpus of Late Postclassic murals. A major contribution to the field is a catalog of mural paintings of Quintana Roo, which was assembled by Alfredo Barrera Rubio, Martine Fettwise-Vienot, and Rubén Maldonado Cárdenas under the direction of Sonia Lombardo de Ruiz; this study contains detailed photographs and drawings of most of the murals in the region, as well as studies of their architectural contexts and iconography (Lombardo de Ruiz, 1987). Arthur Miller has conducted an extensive study of the murals of the Tulúm area, which includes superb new drawings of many of the Tulúm scenes, as well as new material from Tancah and Xelhá. Miller's analysis suggests that some of the mural scenes depict cosmological themes, with a primary focus on the underworld, death, and rebirth (1982; see his bibliography for additional references). Other studies have focused on the murals of Xelhá and Cobá; the subject matter of these is somewhat different, but the underlying themes are also ritualistic and cosmological (Fettweis-Vienot, 1988).

Another major study, by Jacinto Quirarte (1982), has focused on the murals of Santa Rita Corozal, whose style and content contain a rich mix of Maya and Mexican features. The style appears to have been derived primarily from Mayan

and Central Mexican codices (primarily the *Dresden*, *Borgia*, and *Nutall*) and may include Aztec features as well. Quirarte believes that the murals commemorate a battle outcome between Mayan and non-Mayan groups.

Owing to space limitations, the above discussion only touches on some of the more salient features of mural art research. The available literature is far more extensive and is cited in the above-mentioned works.

One of the most interesting aspects of Late Postclassic Mayan art and architecture is the heavy preponderance of Central Mexican features. While such influences had their beginnings in the Terminal Classic period and represent a prominent dimension of the artistic corpus at Chichén Itzá, their increasing frequency in the Late Postclassic clearly reflects a growing rise in external ties and contacts. As several scholars have noted, the communities of the east coast and Chetumal Bay were being drawn into the larger spheres of late metropolitan Mesoamerican civilization. The nature of these ties is poorly understood, but the main avenue of communication appears to have been the extensive trade networks that were thriving at the time of Spanish contact.

Trade

At the time of Spanish contact, the Maya had a complex web of land and water trading networks that girded the peninsula and brought it into close contact with others areas of Mesoamerica. Trade goods from northern Yucatán included salt, cotton cloth, slaves, honey, and other goods, which were exchanged for obsidian, chert, jade and other greenstones, metal artifacts, and other exotic items from distant areas to the south and west. The most prominent long-distance trade goods were salt and obsidian. The salt beds of northern Yucatán were the main source of supply for most of the lowlands, and the trade of this commodity reached as far as Veracruz to the west and Honduras to the south. Most of the obsidian used by Late Postclassic Maya came from the highlands of Guatemala, via overland, riverine, and coastal networks; smaller quantities were imported from sources in Central Mexico. Other, more exotic items imported from distant regions include jade (from the upper Motagua basin of Guatemala), turquoise (from northern Mexico and Arizona, probably via Central Mexico), and gold (from lower Central America). Much of this trade moved over water, along coasts and rivers, through specialized trading ports located in natural harbors, at the mouths of rivers, or on islands.

The study of trade has been an important concern of many projects of the last two decades in the Maya area, and several studies have stressed the role of trading activities in the major historic developments of the Postclassic period. Prominent among these are the ideas advanced by Jeremy Sabloff and William Rathje (1975a, b), who have suggested that changes in the economy—changing commercial values, shifts in production and distribution systems, the rise of a

new mercantilistic system—were key factors differentiating Postclassic society from that of previous periods. It is unclear just how profoundly these changes affected Maya society; while many aspects of the life of the commoners remained unchanged, the emergence of new elites appears to have had a pronounced impact on political economy and ideology of the society. While these developments began in Terminal Classic times and appear to have played a major role in the rise of Chichén Itzá, they were also a key process in the development of Late Postclassic society (Freidel, 1988; Rathje, 1975; Robles and Andrews, 1986).

The prominent role of trade in late Maya culture has been documented since the sixteenth century, and new historic and archaeological research has added considerably to our knowledge of the subject (see Andrews, 1980; Chapman, 1957; Cardós de Méndez, 1959; Dillon, 1975; MacAnany and Isaac, 1989; McKillop and Healey, 1989; Piña Chan, 1978; Roys, 1943; Thompson, 1964, 1970; Tozzer, 1941). A key part of this research has been the excavation of several major Late Postclassic coastal sites, such as El Meco, Cancún, Cozumel, Xelhá, Tancah, Muyil/Chunyaxché, Santa Rita Corozal, Marco González, and Wild Cane Cay (see above for references) and the identification of many others through surveys (Andrews, 1990b; Vail, 1988). Studies have also focused on several of the more prominent trade goods, such as salt (Andrews, 1983a; MacKinnon and Kepecs, 1989), obsidian (Dreiss and Brown, 1989; McKillop and Jackson, 1989; Nelson, 1985), and metal artifacts (Bray, 1977), and on trade routes (cf. Lee and Navarrette, 1978; McKillop and Healey, 1989), ports (Andrews, 1990b; Chapman, 1959; Sabloff and Rathje, 1975b), and watercraft (Edwards, 1965, 1976; Leshikar, 1988; Thompson, 1951).

SYNOPSIS OF CULTURAL HISTORY AND PROCESS, A.D. 1200–1517

The beginning of this last period of prehispanic Maya culture is generally traced to the fall of the Early Postclassic capitol of Chichén Itzá, which, according to traditional historic sources, took place around A.D. 1200. This date has not been confirmed by archaeological evidence; in fact, chronological and ceramic data have led several scholars to place the decline of Chichén Itzá at a much earlier date, in the eleventh century (Lincoln, 1986; Ringle *et al.*, 1991). This apparent gap in the archaeological record may be explained in three ways: (1) evidence of late activity at Chichén Itzá (i.e., post-A.D. 1100) is present but has not yet been documented—this is a reasonable possibility since large parts of Chichén Itzá have not been excavated; (2) there was a "dark age" of approximately a century, in which major elite activity ceased between the fall of Chichén Itzá and the rise of Mayapán; or (3) Mayapán and other late Postclassic centers emerged before A.D. 1200 (perhaps around A.D. 1100)—alternately,

Mayapán may have emerged a century or so after other Late Postclassic communities. Testing these scenarios will provide an interesting challenge to future research.

The rise of the Itzá state, ca. A.D. 800–850, represents a major break in Maya cultural traditions, and the period that followed saw substantial changes in almost every aspect of Maya life, from household economics to large-scale shifts in the social, economic, and political structures of Maya society. Much of this change was the outcome of developments that began in the Classic period. In the eighth and ninth centuries the Maya area was a densely populated mosaic of large and small city-states ruled by regal and ritual dynasties who oversaw the great achievements of what we now call Classic Maya civilization. These polities were also crossing the threshold of their demographic and ecological limits, which when coupled with managerial shortcomings, warfare, and the breakdown of political structures, led to a spectacular process of societal collapse. Cities throughout the southern lowlands were abandoned—some quickly, others over a period of a century or two. Small populations survived in pockets throughout the area, mostly near lakes or rivers, but for the most part they had severed their ties with the Classic past.

The large Classic polities of the northern lowlands also entered a period of decline, though markedly more gradual than that of the southern polities. At the same time, a new cultural renaissance took place with the growth of the Puuc cities of central Yucatán, which began their florescence in the eighth century. For more than a century after the southern collapse Puuc culture flourished in northern Yucatán, and population densities continued to grow. In the tenth and eleventh centuries, however, the north also entered a period of decline. This decline was at first overshadowed by the emergence of a powerful new polity at Chichén Itzá, which crystallized into a prominent regional center in the ninth century. Here, the arrival of foreign groups and the creation of new political structures gave rise to one of the largest cities of prehispanic Mesoamerica and the last attempt by the Maya to create a large regional state. On the basis of archaeological and historic evidence, it would appear that the Itzá state held sway over most of northern Yucatán and exerted substantial commercial and military influence over the entire Maya lowlands. The Itzá economy was fueled by the control of coastal resources and access to external trade networks, coupled with the exploitation of labor and agricultural resources in the interior. However, as the Itzá state grew, many of the cities throughout northern Yucatán were abandoned. Whether this was the result of demographic and/or ecological factors, or commercial and/or military competition with the Itzá, is not known; it may have been the outcome of a combination of these factors. Eventually, Chichén Itzá, whose economy could no longer be sustained in the face of widespread overpopulation and exhaustion of resources, also collapsed [see Robles and Andrews (1986) and Andrews (1990a) for a further discussion of the fall of the Itzá state].

The collapse of the Itzá created a political vacuum in the north and led to the political fragmentation of the entire region into small provinces often at odds with each other. In the northwest, several of these provinces joined together to form a loose confederacy, known as the "League of the Mayapán." The emergence of this new polity appears to have been an attempt to rekindle the power and grandeur of Chichén Itzá. The new rulers recreated many of the physical features of the abandoned Itzá capital at their new seat of power at Mayapán, incorporated many of the Itzá deities in their pantheon, and attempted to lay claim to the ancient territorial domain of Chichén.

Historic records indicate that the League incorporated most of the provinces in north and west Yucatán (Ah Canul, Chakán, Cehpech, Hocabá, Maní, Ah Kin Chel, Sotuta, and Cochuah). It is possible that Cupul (the heartland of the older Itzá domain), and Tases may have formed part of the league, but the evidence is equivocal. All other provinces to the south and east appear to have been independent from Mayapán (Roys, 1957). The archaeological perspective we have of northwestern Yucatán during the Late Postclassic period is limited largely to the data from the research at Mayapán. Few other major sites have been identified, and the remains of most of the settlements encountered by the Spaniards lay buried under modern cities and towns. Despite this situation, the general feeling among archaeologists is that the Late Postclassic Maya of northwest Yucatán did not build many large cities with monumental pyramids and palaces, as they had done in earlier periods. The region had not recovered from the events of the past and was still severely depressed. The eventual collapse of the Mayapán confederacy, in 1441, appears to confirm this; the attempt to rekindle past glories had failed. When the Spanish arrived in the early sixteenth century, Mayapán was abandoned, and political power was scattered among the provinces, often at war with one another.

While the western provinces struggled through hard times, the eastern region of the peninsula underwent a resurgence during the Late Postclassic period. Several of the eastern coastal provinces, such as Chikinchel, Ecab, Cozumel, and Chetumal, experienced substantial population growth and saw the emergence of new communities. This is particularly evident along the coast and islands of Quintana Roo, which has the richest concentration of Postclassic sites in the Mayan area; to date, archaeologists have recorded more than 100 sites with major occupation dating to the Late Postclassic period. Some of these communities are substantial in size and include impressive cores of monumental architecture. Among the largest are Chiquilá, Ecab, El Meco, on the north coast, El Rey and San Miguel on Cancún Island, San Gervasio and Buenavista on Cozumel Island, Mulchi, Playa del Carmen/Xcaret, Paamul, Xelhá, Tancah/Tulúm, and Muyil/Chunyaxché on the central coast, and Tamalcab/La Iglesia/Ichpaatún and Santa Rita on Chetumal Bay. Major centers in the interior include Cobá, Okop, and Kantunilkín. The area of the central coast between Playa del

Cármen and Tulúm was densely inhabited. Residential zones in this area are almost continuous, and it is nearly impossible to determine the boundaries between many sites.

The political organization of the east coast area is poorly understood. While historic records note that Ecab and Chetumal were regional capitals, the extent of their domains is unknown, and the location of the latter is in question. Cozumel appears to have been an independent polity when the Spanish arrived. At present, it appears that Quintana Roo was made up of a mosaic of small, coastal-based city-states, but the identification of the main political centers still eludes us (Robles and Andrews, 1986).

The relatively rapid growth of east coast communities during the Late Postclassic would seem to suggest that the area saw a substantial migration of populations from the interior (not unlike the current influx into the new resort areas of modern times). New inhabitants would have been attracted by the marine resources and maritime trade that flourished along the coast. Many of the coastal communities were major trading ports located next to harbors and bays (Andrews, 1990b). The east coast became a conduit for trade between the northern and the southern lowlands; farther south, along the Belize cays, several entrepots, such as Wild Cane Cay and Marco González on Ambergris Cay, served as important way stations in this commerce (Graham and Pendergast, 1989; Jackson and McKillop, 1987).

In the interior of the Southern Lowlands, the Postclassic saw a modest resurgence of activity in the Central Petén and western northern Belize. Topoxté is the best-known community for the Late Postclassic period, although there is ample evidence of growth at several settlements throughout the Central Petén lakes region. While much of this development was the outcome of the recovery of surviving populations from the Classic period, there is also limited evidence of connections with both the highlands and the lowlands and, possibly, of intrusions by immigrant populations from northern and/or eastern Yucatán (D. S. Rice, 1986; P. M. Rice, 1986, 1987; P. M. Rice and D. S. Rice, 1985). The architectural ties to eastern Yucatán are particularly strong, and it is likely that a corridor for trading activities and cultural contacts was maintained between the Central Petén and the Caribbean by way of northern Belize. The Belizean sites of Tipú, Lamanai, and Santa Rita Corozal, which had substantial occupations during the Late Postclassic period, would have been prominent outposts in this corridor. Lamanai, on the New River, may have served as a gateway to Santa Rita and Chetumal Bay, which was a major hub of activity in the Late Postclassic period (Pendergast, 1986b).

By the early sixteenth century, the inhabitants of the central Petén had established a capital at Tayasal (or Noh Petén) on the island of Flores in Late Petén Itzá. Topoxté appears to have faded out of the picture by this time (P. M. Rice, 1986, p. 291), though a small population may have continued to

live there into the seventeenth century (Jones, 1992). While the polity that was based at Tayasal is often referred to as an "Itzá kingdom" in the literature, Grant Jones (1992) has observed that there is no evidence that the people of the Central Petén ever referred to themselves collectively or individually as "Itzá." Nor is there any evidence that they constituted anything resembling a kingdom. In the fifteenth century this region probably included an assortment of native Chol-speaking Maya, as well as groups of Yucatec and Mopán Maya who had migrated into the area in earlier times. By the seventeenth century the "Itzá" polity was made up of four territorial provinces with a lineage-based confederated government based at Tayasal; the political structure was most likely a scaled-down version of the multepal government of the earlier confederacy of Mayapán (Jones, 1992).

On the opposite side of the Yucatán Peninsula, along the southern Gulf coast of Tabasco and Campeche, there is also evidence of substantial activity during the Postclassic period. Prominent trading centers emerged at Campeche, Champotón, and Tixchel and at several sites on Isla del Cármen and the Xicalango peninsula. Although archaeological data from these sites are limited, historic accounts indicate that this coast was heavily inhabited at the time of Spanish contact (Jiménez Valdés, 1984, 1987; Ochoa and Vargas Pacheco, 1987; Ruz Lhuillier, 1969). From Preclassic times, this area was a corridor for trade between the Central Mexican highlands and the Maya lowlands and between the western and northern lowlands. There is also archaeological and historic evidence to suggest that the Campeche coast maintained close ties to the Caribbean via an overland route to Chetumal Bay (Ball, 1985a, 1986; Ball and Taschek, 1989). Clearly, then, the southern Campeche coast was a major crossroads in the trade networks of southern Mesoamerica. Scattered historic evidence raises the possibility that, shortly before the arrival of the Spanish, the Aztecs had acquired a foothold on the Xicalango peninsula. However, this evidence is tenuous and has not found support in the archaeological record (Ochoa and Vargas Pacheco, 1987; Robles Castellanos, personal communication, 1990). Trading links with the Aztecs were being established, however (Ball and Rovner, 1972; Berlin, 1956), and it appears likely that the Gulf coast region was in the process of becoming a major corridor for contacts between Central Mexico and the Maya area at the time of the Spanish conquest.

CONCLUSIONS

As the above survey indicates, research on the Late Postclassic period of the Maya Lowlands has seen considerable progress in the last few decades. Nonetheless, our vision of native culture and society at the time of the Spanish arrival is limited. It is somewhat ironic that, owing to the decipherment of hieroglyphic texts, we have more detailed knowledge of the history of many

Classic period states than we do of their Postclassic successors (cf. Culbert, 1991; Houston, 1989). This disparity is frustrating, as research on the Postclassic period is critical to our understanding of the processes that characterize the overall trajectory of Maya civilization. The comments that follow address this issue and are based to a large degree on the published work and conversations with several colleagues, particularly E. Wyllys Andrews V, Arlen and Diane Chase, David Freidel, Arthur Miller, David Pendergast, William Rathje, Don and Prudence Rice, Fernando Robles, and Jeremy Sabloff. While they are not responsible for the specifics of the argument, their views have played a major role in developing a new vision of the Postclassic Maya.

Traditional views of the Postclassic Maya have often been shaped by comparisons to their Classic ancestors, and they have suffered accordingly. The comparison is succinctly captured in the chronological term that defines both the time and the society: they are "post" classic. In contrasting the Postclassic with earlier periods, archaeologists have focused on the decrease in the quality and volume of construction and the pronounced decline in craftsmanship in sculpture and ceramics (Andrews IV, 1965, pp. 320–327; Pollock, 1962, p. 16; Smith, 1971, p. 154). While no one would deny that, in certain respects, Postclassic Maya culture was a pale reflection of the grandeur of the Classic period, it cannot be defined or understood by viewing it from a Classic perspective. Simplistic comparisons of this sort tend to overlook the late Maya as a dynamic society moving in new directions, with priorities different from those of their ancestors.

While Postclassic Maya culture was shaped by its Classic past, it was undergoing dramatic changes. The spectacular growth of communities along the coasts indicates an increasing reliance on maritime resources, a significant shift from the predominantly agricultural economies of the past. Inland settlements also clustered around rivers and lakes, which provided them with a more balanced subsistence base and reduced the risk of agricultural failure. These shifts in settlement patterns also led to substantive changes in the economy, as coastal and riverine communities participated in growing trade networks that brought the Maya into closer contact with distant regions of Meso- and Central America. These contacts are evident not only in the increased volume of long-distance trade goods at archaeological sites, but in the foreign influences displayed in mural art, such as are found at Tulúm and Santa Rita.

The oft-lamented decline in the quality of architecture and craftsmanship may also reflect a shift in values that was in many ways more efficient and cost effective and, ultimately, more beneficial to the population as a whole. The down-sized temples and mass-produced ceramics may be less aesthetic, but they also represented less of a drain on the resources of the society. Rathje has been the most effective proponent of this argument:

> . . . while Classic populations were to a large extent integrated through the costly maintenance of an elite minority, Postclassic populations were most probably integrated through a rising standard of living locked into large-scale population participation in a commerce which emphasized economic efficiency and mass consumption. (1975, p. 436)

These economic shifts were also accompanied by dramatic changes in the political and ideological realms. Although our understanding of Late Postclassic political systems is still limited, it is now clear that the Maya had moved away from the highly autocratic system of royal kings and dynasties that characterized the Classic period, in which the very essence of the city state was embodied in the single persona of the regal/ritual ruler and his lineage. In fact, the potential stagnation of such a system may have deprived the Classic Maya of an effective managerial class and was likely one of the factors in their collapse. Postclassic political structures, which included confederacies, possible joint rulership arrangements, and an empowered nobility, appear to have been moving in the direction of more flexible and versatile forms of leadership.

Ritual sanctification was a critical dimension of Classic period rulership, and the unraveling of the Classic political order also brought about a drastic shift in the religious core of Maya society. The archaeological record speaks volumes in this respect: the decline in the number and size of religious monuments during the Postclassic is eloquent testimony of the decreased role of centralized religion and of the increasing secular nature of late Maya society. Ironically, it is the material expression of this trend that gave rise to the notion of the Postclassic as a period of decline:

> That the age was materialistic, that personal comfort and glory came before religious devotion, is shown by the palaces and finer residences being better built and apparently more lavishly furnished than the temples and other ceremonial buildings. (Pollock, 1962, p. 16)

However, there is ample evidence that these changes may reflect a structural shift rather than a decline in religious values. Archaeologists working at many Late Postclassic sites have noted that the widespread distribution of household shrines; this is particularly evident at many residences at Mayapán, Tulúm, and at many communities along the east coast. Moreover, small "private" shrines are the most common feature at many of these sites, where they form an integral part of plaza groups and residential clusters (Freidel and Sabloff, 1984; Lothrop, 1924; Proskouriakoff, 1955, 1962; Vargas de la Peña, 1992). As several scholars have noted, this pattern of dispersed religious structures and household shrines is a clear indication of the decentralization of religion, and on a higher level, it is eloquent testimony of the dispersion of economic resources and political power in late Maya society.

Social scientists have always been fascinated by the fact that the Maya represent what is perceived to be an anomaly in the annals of world history: a

society that reached an unusually high level of complexity in a tropical environment with few resources and a variety of other limiting factors. As a consequence of this perception, many scholars have argued that the Classic Maya collapse was the natural outcome of that process of development. What is generally overlooked in this argument is that the Late Postclassic Maya were in the process of readapting, and developing new levels of complexity. This adds an important dimension to our understanding of the overall trajectory of Maya civilization and a strong argument for the benefits of more intensive research on the Postclassic period.

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