6 THE GEOPOLITICS OF THE COASTAL MAYA ECONOMY IN SOUTHERN BELIZE: RELATIONS BETWEEN THE COASTAL AND INLAND MAYA

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Negotiation through feasting, marriage and trade alliances were important ways the ruling Maya established, maintained, and reinforced power relationships. Although there was earlier settlement both inland and on the coast of southern Belize, population dramatically expanded during the Late Classic. The coast was a source of biologically necessary salt, other marine resources for ritual and subsistence activities, and a link to trade goods from the outside world via sea trade. Rather than use military force or imposing local rulers to incorporate the coastal Maya salt works into a regional tribute economy, the inland dynastic Maya may have created trading and other alliances, sanctified by rituals, in order to maintain a regular trade in salt. As part of the political hierarchy of feasting, the coastal Maya of southern Belize, perhaps centered at the trading port of Wild Cane Cay, were incorporated into the ritual ideology and political structure of the Maya dynasties. The decentralized political economy of southern Belize, in which power was brokered more by negotiation than by direct political control or tribute, is underscored by the coastal Maya's ability to survive the Classic Maya collapse and find new markets with the emerging polities to the north during the Postclassic.

Introduction

Discussions of the political economy, settlement history, and geopolitics of southern Belize have focused on inland cities (Leventhal 1990; Bill and Braswell 2005; Braswell et al. 2005, 2007; Prufer 2005; Prufer et al. 2007), largely ignoring the long trajectory of Late Preclassic through Postclassic settlement on the coast and offshore cays (but see Hammond 1975). By implication, the coast was not important in the geopolitics of ancient Maya society in southern Belize. Or perhaps external relations of the inland Maya were not directed towards the coast or sea trade, but instead towards other inland politics (Braswell et al. 2007), so that any trade with the coast was marginal to the geopolitical world of the inland Maya. Coastal sites may have been marginalized because they lack dynastic records. Furthermore, sea-level rise has inundated the coast and its ancient settlements, obscuring their visibility in the modern coastal landscape (Figure 1; McKillop 1996a, 2002, 2005a). Still, the coast of southern Belize was a source of ritual and dietary resources for the inland Maya as well as a transportation avenue for goods and resources from farther away. What were the relations between the coastal and inland Maya in southern Belize? From a coastal perspective, did the inland Maya of southern Belize figure in the political economy, settlement history, and geopolitics of the ancient Maya on the coast and cays of southern Belize? Were the inland Maya of southern Belize marginal to the geopolitical world of the coastal Maya of southern Belize?

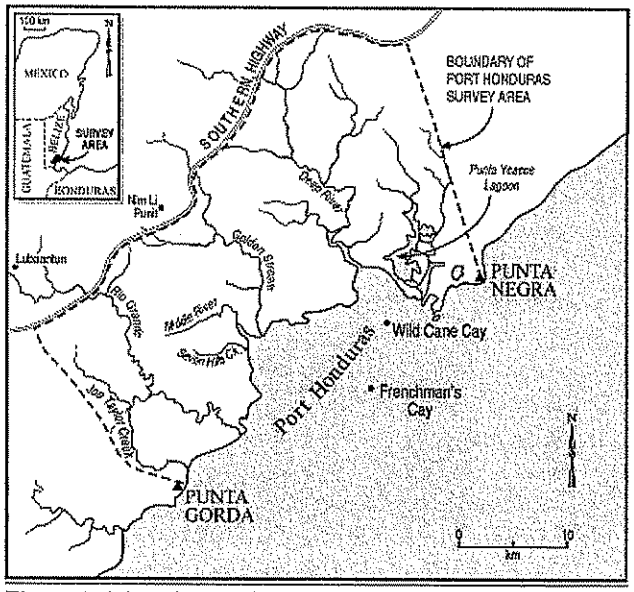

Figure 1. Map of Coastal Survey Area of Southern Belize

Settlement History of Southern Belize

Only by viewing the larger geopolitics of the ancient Maya world over time from the Preclassic through the Postclassic periods can a meaningful perspective of coastal-inland relations in southern Belize be evaluated. The Preclassic witnessed settlement throughout the Maya lowlands, with the Sierra Red pottery marking broad patterns of trade and

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communication during the Late Preclassic, including southern Belize, as noted by inland settlement at Uxbenka (Prufer et al. 2007) and coastal settlement at Butterfly Wing (McKillop 1996a). Uxbenka began as a small farming community located on good arable land. Butterfly Wing followed pan lowland ceramic traditions of Protoclassic mammiform tetrapod pottery vessels, Sierra Red pottery, and an obsidian flake industry. Awe and Healy (1994) document the widespread production of obsidian flakes from cobbles, beginning in the Middle Preclassic period, prior to the core-blade technology typical from Late Preclassic times onward. Butterfly Wing also followed the Preclassic tradition of shell middens, which continued later in the area at the Schmidt Site and other nearby Paynes Creek salt works.

A major factor in coastal-inland relations during the Classic period was the strong inland demand for salt to meet the basic daily biological needs of the growing population, particularly in urban areas (McKillop 2002, 2005b). It was not only salt, but also other marine resources — both for ritual and subsistence uses — that forged inland interest in the coast (McKillop 1995, 1996a, 2002, 2004, 2005b, 2005c). The inland dynastic Maya's interest in the adjacent coast also was driven by the nature of external relations, specifically the importance of the coast as a transportation gateway for goods and resources from outside the region (McKillop 1996a).

Settlement in southern Belize increased on the coast and inland throughout the Classic Period. Dated monuments record dynastic histories at Uxbenka, Nim Li Punit, and Pusilhá (Braswell et al. 2005, 2007; Wanyerka 2005). Ceramic chronologies place Lubaantun in the Late Classic Tepeu 2 and 3 (Hammond 1975), and extend settlement near Pusilha to the end of the Late Classic during Tepeu 3 (Bill and Braswell 2005). The earliest radiocarbon dates from Wild Cane Cay place initial settlement during the Early Classic, along with nearby Pelican Cay (McKillop 2002:158). Ceramic chronology and radiocarbon dated midden deposits at coastal communities indicate expansion of settlement in the Late Classic at Wild Cane Cay, Pork and Doughboy Point, Village Farm, Green Vine Snake, Frenchman's Cay, and the Paynes Creek salt works (McKillop 1996a, 2002, 2005a, 2005b, 2006, 2007; Sills 2007; Somers 2007).

Wild Cane Cay was first settled in the Early Classic as a fishing community. During the Late Classic, Wild Cane Cay became a trading port, likely controlling the inland transportation of salt from the nearby Paynes Creek salt works (McKillop 2005a, b). As a trading port, Wild Cane Cay also funneled other maritime resources, such as stingray spines, conch shells, and seafood, inland. The abundance of obsidian at the island underscores the islanders' easy access to this imported material and its participation in long distance sea trade during the Late Classic.

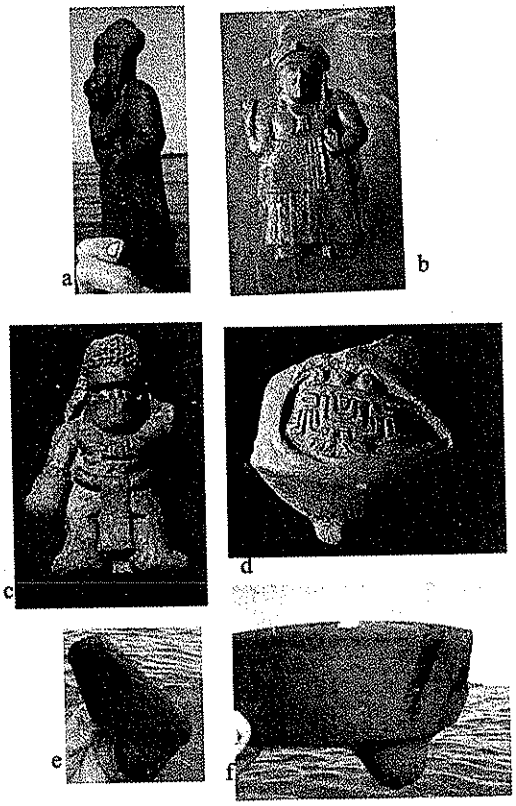

Figure 2. Unit-stamped Pottery at Coastal Sites in Southern Belize Mark Trade and Communication between Inland Southern Belize and Guatemala during Late and Terminal Classic Periods.

There is substantial evidence for infrastructure related to the production, storage, and distribution of salt at the Paynes Creek salt works (McKillop 1995, 2002, 2005b, 2005c, 2007, 2008; Sills 2007; Somers 2007). At Paynes Creek, salt was produced in rectangular

wooden buildings, where brine was boiled in pots over fires to produce loose salt or salt cakes, leaving behind the broken bowls and jars, the cylindrical clay vessel supports, and water jars. They have wooden structures used for indoor production of salt by boiling brine in pots over fires, and likely other wooden structures used to concentrate the salinity of the brine before boiling. Salt boiling vessels were made using local clays and quartzite sand temper that was commonly available locally. Brine was boiled to produce salt. Salt production took place inside wooden structures, providing protection from rain, which is common even during the dry season. Mapping individual pottery sherds at the K'ak' Naab' salt works indicated waste was moved outdoors, presumably to keep the workshop clean of debris (McKillop 2007). Buildings also were used to store equipment and supplies, such as firewood and water jars for storing brine and salt pots for boiling, as at Sacapulas. Some structures were likely warehouses where salt was stored before it was transported elsewhere. A full-size wooden canoe paddle found at the K'ak' Naab' salt works provides evidence for water transport (McKillop 2005b, 2007). Some of the salt works hosted periodic salt rituals, as evidenced by pottery ocarinas and serving vessels. They were not locally produced, in contrast to the salt boiling vessels.

A major factor during the Postclassic period was the abandonment of most inland cities in the southern lowlands, rise to prominence of Chichen Itza and Mayapan, and their participation in a much larger geopolitical world from central Mexico to Honduras (Sabloff and Andrews 1986; Smith and Berdan 2003; Chase and Rice 1985; McKillop 2006). Coastal trade figured prominently in this political landscape. Coastal settlement increased in the Postclassic, perhaps in response to population movement from inland areas, but clearly as a response to an increase in sea trade. Prominent Classic period cities in southern Belize were virtually abandoned, including those cities with public dynastic records carved on stelae at Nim Li Punit, Uxbenka, and Pusilhá, as well as those without, notably Lubaantun. Apart from limited Postclassic settlement noted near Pusilhá (Braswell et al. 2007), available data indicate the inland area was largely depopulated. On the coast of southern Belize, the Paynes Creek salt industry collapsed for lack of an inland market, but its port on Wild Cane Cay survived, and became a major player in Postclassic sea trade and the Postclassic Mesoamerican world (McKillop 2005a). Settlement continued elsewhere on the south coast of Belize at Frenchman's Cay and Foster Farm, but there was a diminution of settlement on the coast compared to the Classic period. Fig 3

Sixteenth century Spaniards and later British buccaneers and logwood workers encountered Maya both on the coast and the interior of southern Belize

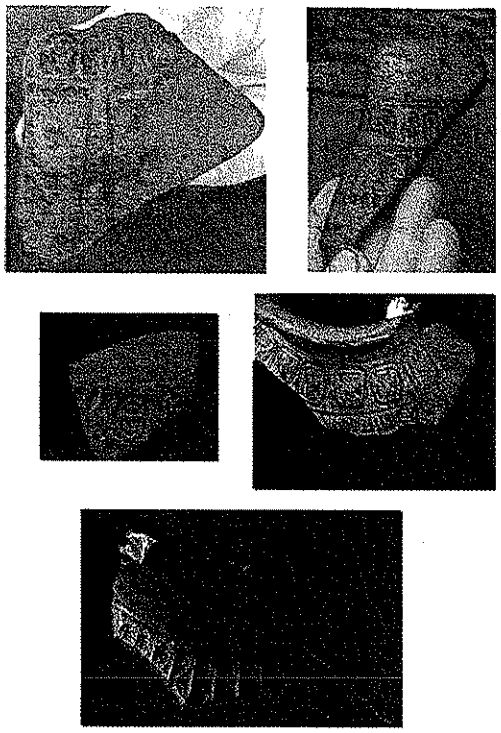

Figure 3. Late to Terminal Classic imports to the coast of southern Belize from inland regions (a-d) and the northern Yucatan (e-f): a-b), Mold-Made Figurine Whistle from Stingray Lagoon, c) Figuring Whistle from David Westby, d) gouge-incised Jar from Carpenter Site, e-f) Trickle Ware tripod bowl from Stingray Lagoon.

(McKillop 2005: 194-196; Wilk 1987). The sixteenth century Spaniards disrupted a thriving circum-Yucatan canoe trade that included Wild Cane Cay. The presence of Spanish artifacts at Wild Cane Cay, such as fragments of Olive jars stylistically dated between 1550 and 1770,

indicate early historic European presence in the coastal waters north of Punta Gorda. Among the voyages of pirates, the famous British buccaneer Bartholomew Sharp captured a Spanish Dominican Friar and several Maya south of Punta Gorda in 1677 (McKillop 2005a: 195). According to Richard Wilk (1987), the Maya were dispersed in the rainforest in small communities inland in southern Belize. Indigenous Maya population grew in southern Belize with Maya fleeing forced labor and other hardships in Guatemala in the late nineteenth century. Logging along the rivers of southern Belize by 1802, along with nineteenth century Garifuna settlement of Punta Gorda, the US Confederate settlement north of Punta Gorda, and settlement of the coast and cays by fisher folk is evidenced by historic pottery, glassware, and metal at various locations, including Wild Cane Cay, Village Farm, the Sapodilla Cays, and Deep River (McKillop 2005: 194-196).

Discussion

There are several models pertaining to political economies elsewhere that might explain coastal-inland relations in southern Belize. The models include the "*tribute model*," the "*alliance model*," and the "*household production model*." The "tribute model" parallels the Aztec or Inca strategy of using military force or imposing local rulers. Following the tribute model, the inland dynastic Maya controlled the coast (trading port of Wild Cane Cay) and its resources (such as the Paynes Creek salt works) by incorporating the coast into a regional state owing tribute. In the "alliance model," the inland dynastic Maya may have created trading and other alliances, sanctified by rituals and feasts, in order to maintain a regular supply by trade in salt and access to external sea trade routes. Some areas fluctuated between alliance and tribute, such as the Pacific coast "Soconusco" area during the Aztec empire (Voorhies 1989). In the "household production" model, households were largely self-sufficient, resulting in little communication or trade between the coast and inland areas. In this model, coastal salt production was limited to household or cottage industry, with limited distribution, underscoring the need for long-distance import from the northern Yucatan salt flats, or implying that inland salt sources were adequate.

The Paynes Creek salt works were not part of *the "household production model,"* since they appear not to have been directly associated with residences or communities, and because the scale of production exceeded household demand. The salt workers presumably lived year-round at the contemporary coastal settlements nearby. There is no evidence of the "*tribute model*" at the Paynes Creek salt works. They were not part of the royal court workshops supplying goods for the dynastic Maya, because of the considerable distance. There is no evidence of dynastic Maya direct control of production (like the Inca used with Inca style warehouses throughout their empire, for example). The "alliance model" best fits the Paynes Creek salt works, with independent, local producers engaged in a negotiated trade relationship with the inland dynastic Maya. Because of the distance and the special skills needed for salt production and canoe navigation, the dynastic Maya at their inland urban centers may have found it more cost effective to negotiate trade and perhaps marriage alliances with the coastal salt producers than to manage the production and distribution of salt directly. Moreover, the Late Classic Maya polities of southern Belize, closest to the salt works, were decentralized, putting the coastal Maya in an advantageous position both economically and politically.

But why would the coastal elite have wanted to satisfy the inland salt demand by establishing trade alliances with the dynastic leaders of the inland cities? The main trading port of Wild Cane Cay was located some seven km from the Paynes Creek salt works, at the mouth of the Deep River and the northern end of the relatively sheltered waters of Port Honduras (McKillop 1996, 2005a). This location was at the nexus of the riverine and coastal trading routes. In the "*alliance model*," as part of the political hierarchy of feasting, the coastal Maya, perhaps centered at the trading port of Wild Cane Cay, were incorporated into the ritual ideology and political structure of the Maya dynasties that drove their understanding of the Maya world, the gods, and people's place in the world. The coastal Maya received goods such as

ocarinas, serving vessels, and other trade pottery that were markers of status. The stylistic similarities between Paynes Creek ceramics, especially figurines whistles and "unit-stamped" pottery, tie the coast to inland cities due west in southern Belize and adjacent Guatemala, as far as Seibal, Altar de Sacrificios, and the Petexbatun region (Figures 2 and 3; McKillop 2002), further supporting the "alliance model."

After the abandonment of the Paynes Creek salt works, salt was locally produced as part of the household economy during the Postclassic at the trading port of Wild Cane Cay and at nearby Frenchman's Cay (McKillop 2002:112). The Late Classic Paynes Creek salt works are clearly an industry, whereas elsewhere production was for household needs, as at Wild Cane Cay and Frenchman's Cay in the Postclassic; even if the household-produced salt was traded elsewhere, that trade was organized at the household level.

The "*alliance model*" describes the organization of the Postclassic economy at Wild Cane Cay and its survival as an autonomous trading port when larger inland cities in southern Belize were abandoned. The Postclassic witnessed exponential growth of sea trade, with Wild Cane Cay figuring as a major player linking external worlds and the Maya. Wild Cane Cay was integrated into the Mesoamerican world system as a major Postclassic period trading port.

The mercantile Maya on Wild Cane Cay realigned their trading partners with more distant areas in Honduras, Guatemala, northern Belize, the Yucatan, and central Mexico. A Postclassic coral foundation was dedicated with the sacrifice of a young woman accompanied by an imported Las Vegas Polychrome pottery vessel from Honduras (Figure 4). Obsidian from the La Esperanza outcrop in Honduras was more commonly traded outside the Maya area, so its presence at Wild Cane Cay further underscores external ties beyond the Maya area (McKillop et al. 1988). Trade with Guatemala included significant amounts of obsidian from the Ixtepeque outcrop, as well as minor quantities from El Chayal and Rio Pixcaya, along with Tohil Plumbate pottery from the Pacific coast (Figure 4). Wild Cane Cay was linked to other coastal trading ports farther north, such as Marco Gonzalez and San Juan on Ambergris Cay, and Isla Cerritos. They included similar repertoires of trade goods, notably Tohil Plumbate, green obsidian, and Tulum (or "Payil") Red pottery (Figure 4). Both the high quality and similar tool styles point to Colha in northern Belize as the source for chert at Wild Cane Cay (as well as the Paynes Creek salt works).

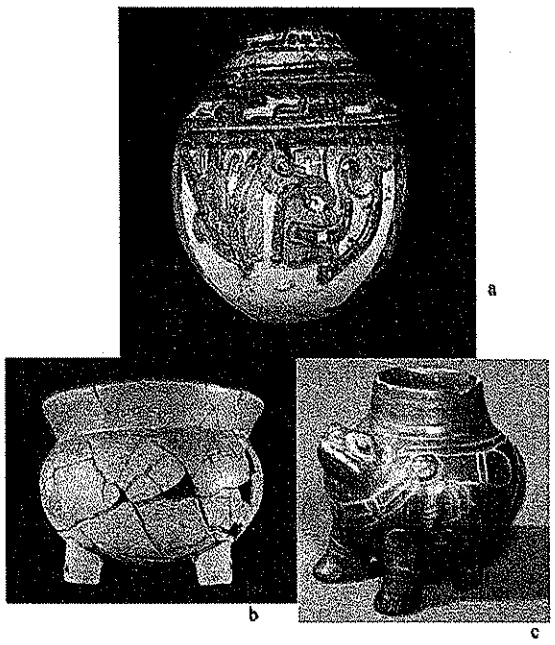

Figure 4. Pottery from Beyond Southern Belize Marks Trading Port of Wild Cane Cay's Participation in International Trade of the Postclassic. a), Las Vegas Polychrome from Honduras in Burial 10; b) Tulum Red (Payil Red) from Burial 11/12; c), Tohil Plumbate from Pacific coast of Guatemala.

Conclusions

The geopolitics of modern southern Belize are poor indicators of the dynamics of the ancient past in the region. Further archaeological field research likely will expand the knowledge of Preclassic settlement both inland at Uxbenka and on the coast at Butterfly Wing. Settlement expanded in the Early Classic, both at inland farming communities such as Uxbenka and on the coast at Wild Cane Cay and Pelican Cay. The rise of dynastic polities at Uxbenka, Nim Li Punit, and Pusilhá accompanied a dramatic population increase in southern Belize both inland and on the coast. Inscriptions on carved stelae cement the dynastic history of leadership,

but the battles and alliances reported are largely with as yet unknown polities. It is traded pottery that elucidates much of the geopolitics of negotiation and alliances: The distribution of "unit-stamped" pottery from the coast inland to the Petexbatun region of modern Guatemala and the distribution of Lubaantun-style figurine whistles on the coast underscore enduring coastal-inland communication in the Late and Terminal Classic periods. Coastal control of production and distribution of salt at the Paynes Creek salt works defined the relations of the coastal Maya with inland polities whose inhabitants needed salt. When the inland polities fell, the coastal salt industry ceased. However, the mercantile, opportunistic Maya at the trading port of Wild Cane Cay, accustomed to negotiating with their inland neighbors for salt and other marine resources, were able to build new alliances with emerging politics far to the north, tying into the circum-Yucatan sea trade of the Postclassic. The only arable land on the coast and cays of southern Belize (McKillop 1994, 1996b) has been inundated by sea-level rise, with ancient salt works and sites submerged below mangroves and underwater, a sobering reminder to modern residents of low-lying areas in Belize and beyond.

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