

comments

CON MANOS ARRIBA: TAYASAL AND ARCHAEOLOGY

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Controversy exists over the geographic placement of the ethnohistoric Itza capital called "Tayasal." At the heart of this dispute are the differences and limitations inherent in the use of either archaeological or ethnohistoric data to solve the problem. As presently understood, archaeological data do not support the traditional placement of Tayasal in Lake Peten-Itza.

In asserting that "Tayasal is positively located on the island of Flores" (emphasis supplied), Jones et al. (1981) have overlooked the archaeological material thus far recovered from the island which point to its archaeologically preeminent position in the Early to Middle Postclassic period of the Central Peten (A. Chase 1979a:102). Whereas the ethnohistorical part of their paper quite cogently presents the long-accepted viewpoint concerning the location of Tayasal in the Lake Peten-Itza area, their archaeological section raises questions concerning the difficult Postclassic time period without adequately taking into account the archaeological record. It is, in fact, possible to state that the authors are guilty of their own trespass in that their "conclusions regarding the location of Tayasal are premature" and that their "proposition is stated in too positive a manner."

In order to demonstrate archaeologically that Tayasal was on Flores, the traditional data base—ceramics and architecture—must or should show the following: (1) large-scale occupation which could conceivably continue into the Historic period; and (2) indications of the intrusive nature of the population, most likely evinced in the form of Yucatec similarities (as the Itza who occupied Tayasal are known to have come from the north) either in terms of architecture, or artifacts, or ceramics (or all three). In order to assess the above for the Lake Peten area, both the chronology of the Central Peten and potential problems with this chronology must be made clear (see Figure 1). This chronology is based upon both stratigraphic and ceramic relationships. There is not, however, general agreement about either (a) the relationships between ceramic phases at individual sites; (b) the relationships between ceramic types and phases and absolute time; or (c) the end date for ceramic production. Further, the terminology "Early," "Middle," and "Late Postclassic" has not been standardized—at least as regards the placement of the Augustine and Topoxté Ceramic groups.

On the basis of the results of new and ongoing research in the Maya Postclassic, the early and late facets of the New Town Phase at Barton Ramie may now be seen as dating to the Early and Middle Postclassic periods. The site apparently was not occupied after the Middle Postclassic period.

At Topoxté, Prudence Rice (1979:72-82) sees the early and late facets of the Isla Phase as dating to what will be termed here the late facet Early Postclassic, Middle Postclassic, and an earlier facet of the Late Postclassic. Part of her reasoning for this dating depends upon her supposition that all Postclassic ceramic sequences cease around A.D. 1450 (Rice 1979:Figure 20). If

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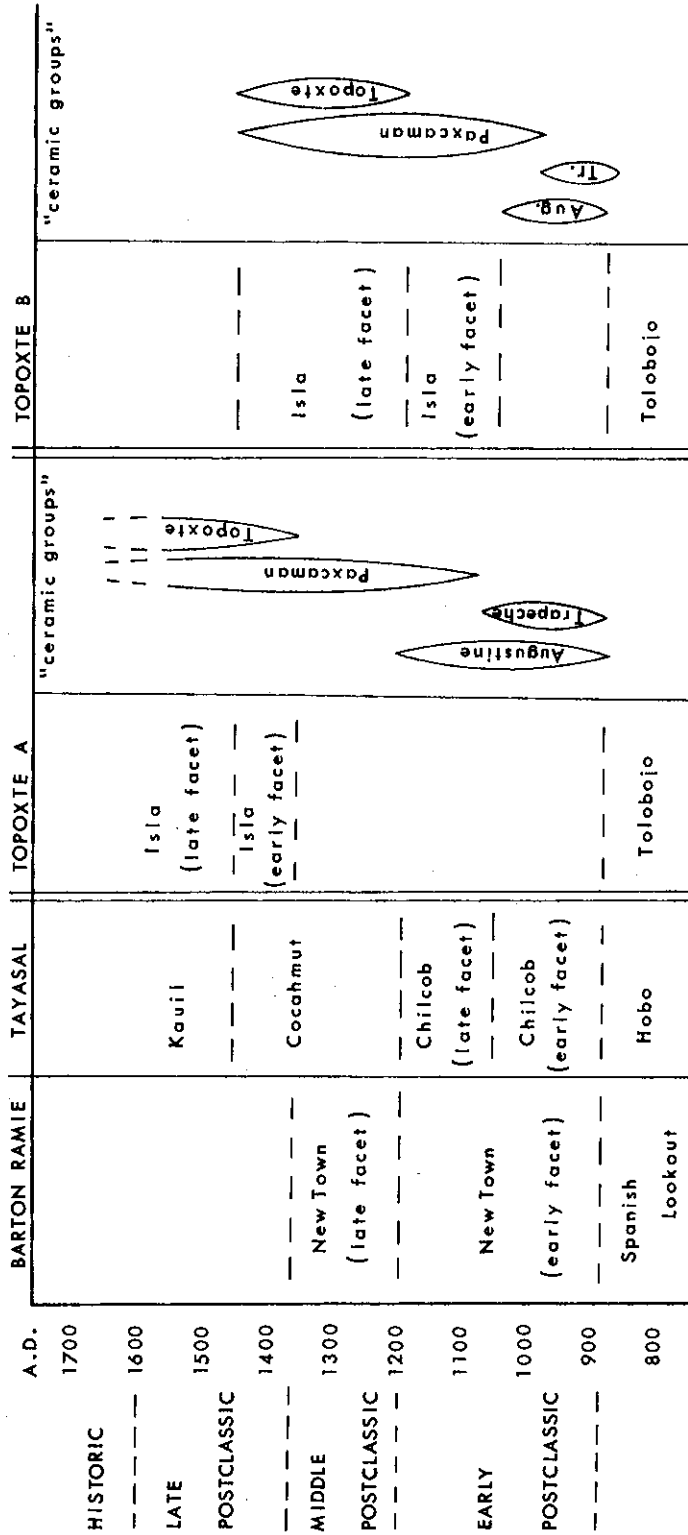


Figure 1. Lowland Maya Postclassic Ceramic Chronologies in the Central Peten area. The Barton Ramie chronology is revised from Sharer and Chase (1976). The two schemes presented for Topoxte represent two current viewpoints in the Central Peten Postclassic. "Topoxte A" assumes a continuity in Maya/Itza ceramic material through the Historic period and groups the ceramic phases based on stratigraphic relationships, stylistic and modal similarities, and cross-dating. Topoxte B (Rice 1979:Figure 20) assumes the cessation of all Maya/Itza ceramic production at A.D. 1450; data from the Tayasal Peninsula indicate that such is not the case and would instead provide stratigraphic support for "Topoxte A." The Tayasal sequence is tentatively presented here, as analysis is still ongoing; the final sequence, however, should vary little from that given.

Rice is correct and ceramics were not made after A.D. 1450, it may then be impossible to locate Tayasal ceramically. However, evidence from Tayasal itself (A. Chase 1979a, 1979b) and northern Belize (D. Chase 1979, 1980, 1981; Pendergast 1977:130) suggests that there was a continuity among ceramics from Postclassic through Historic. Recognition of the "Historic" existence of Maya/Itza ceramics along with a stylistic consideration of Isla Phase ceramics would lead to the inclusion of the Isla Phase within the Late Postclassic and Historic periods.

Bearing in mind the problems indicated above, we may return to the question of the location of Tayasal. At Flores the recovered ceramics largely date to the Early and Middle Postclassic while later material (Paxcaman Ceramic Group) in the Lake Peten-Itza area has been recovered from the lake shore areas (A. Chase 1979a; see also Cowgill 1963). Collections made on all the islands in Lake Peten-Itza in 1977 also support the Early-Middle Postclassic date for the use of these islands. Thus, while Jones et al. feel that Tayasal is "positively" located on Flores the ceramic data cannot be interpreted, at least at this date, to support such a claim. In fairness to them, however, major excavations have not been undertaken, although the recovered sample (Cowgill 1963; A. Chase 1979a) is believed to be representative.

What the archaeological data apparently demonstrate are that two ceramic spheres exist for the Late Postclassic period of the Central Peten. In 1976 (A. Chase 1976:Figure 6), Paxcaman and Topoxté ceramics were held to have coexisted in the Central Peten. In the strictest sense, however, each of the two ceramic groups exists in its own sphere. If Topoxté Group pottery is viewed from the standpoint of Barton Ramie (Sharer and Chase 1976) or from that of Lake Peten-

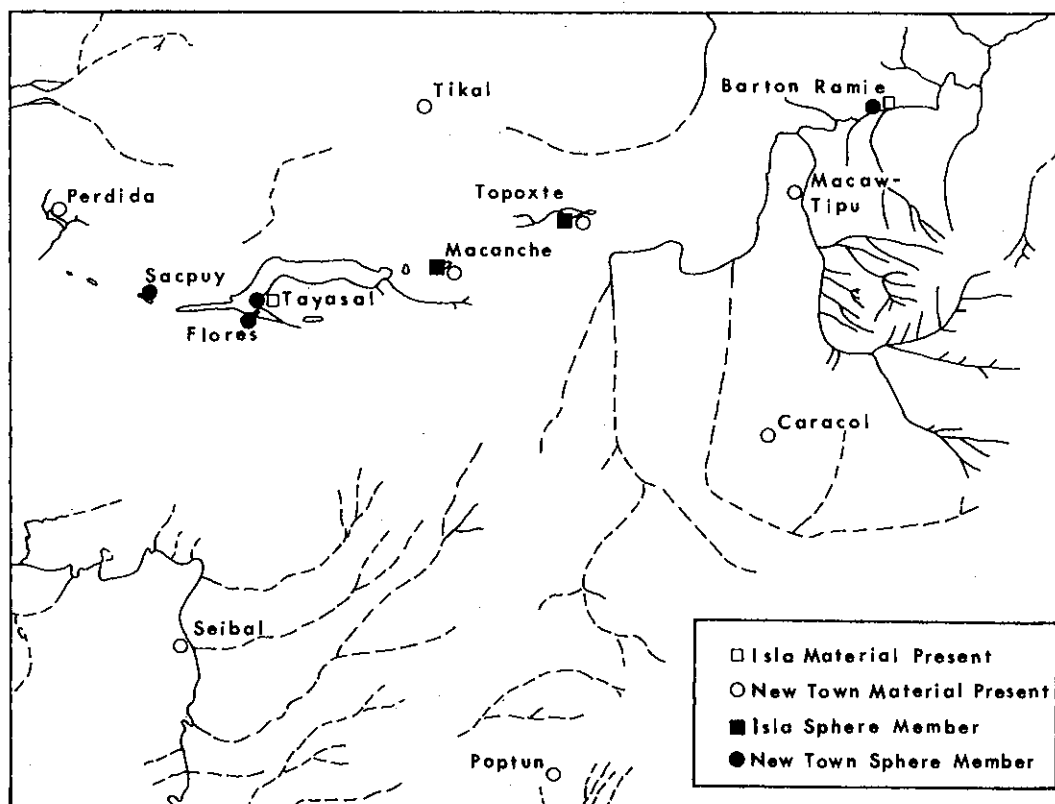


Figure 2. Map illustrating the known extent and ceramic sphere distribution of the Central Peten Postclassic tradition. Other sites containing New Town material in the Lake Peten ("Tayasal") area are known, but not shown here. In addition, the site "Poptun" may be a full New Town Sphere member.

Itza (A. Chase 1979a:96-102), there is little overlap between these complexes unless they are seen at the larger level of what may be termed a "generalized Postclassic complex" which existed from northern Yucatan through the Peten and Belize. Although Rice (1979:70) sees Topoxté ceramics as having close ties to the indigenous Postclassic Peten material (i.e., Augustine and Paxcaman), Topoxté Group pottery also shows evidence of close ties to ceramic material from the eastern littoral of the Maya area. The Topoxté Group is seen here as comprising its own distinct sphere in the central Peten, a sphere encircled by a coexisting sphere which included the central Belize area and Lake Peten and probably the district to the south of these regions around Poptun (see Figure 2).

Prudence Rice (1979:Figure 20) proposes that the New Town Ceramic Sphere (Willey et al. 1967; Sharer and Chase 1976:289-291) ends at A.D. 1200 to be followed by an "Isla Ceramic Sphere." While this may hold true for Lakes Yaxha and Macanche, it does not appear to be the case for the Lake Peten-Itza area (A. Chase 1979a:99-103).

A Late Postclassic expression of the New Town Ceramic Sphere (not found at Barton Ramie), then, may be suggested as surrounding the area defined as the Isla Sphere which extends from somewhere east of Lake Yaxha to Lake Macanche. The Topoxté Group can be demonstrated to be a cohesive ceramic sphere. At its limits there is only the slightest overlap with the coexisting late expression of the New Town Ceramic Sphere with possibly one vessel represented at the site of Barton Ramie to the east and one Topoxté Red jar present in the excavated Tayasal Peninsula sample. The "core area" of the Isla Sphere is Topoxté itself where only 30 sherds of the Paxcaman Group have been recovered (Rice 1979:64). Surrounding the core of the sphere—possibly the production center as represented by the site of Topoxté—is an area which approximates the form and design elements of the core but also contains mixed elements from surrounding spheres. This is evident from the Rices' work at Macanche, in which "the Topoxte and Paxcaman Ceramic Groups, at least as they are represented at these two sites, share a great deal of similarity in vessel dimensions, polychrome decorative styles . . . and design motifs" (Jones et al. 1981:543). The Macanche ceramics may be an archaeological example of "assimilation."

In seeking to locate archaeologically and ethnohistorically the known "Tayasal," capital of the "Itza," it must be remembered that the "Itza" or "foreigners" were reported as having migrated into the Central Peten from northern Yucatan. The Late Postclassic New Town Ceramic Sphere of the Central Peten is largely devoid of northern Yucatec ceramic influences except for the pan-regional censer complexes associated with religious practices common to both Isla and New Town Spheres. Topoxté redwares, on the other hand, exhibit stylistic similarities to vessels common on the east coast of Yucatan and Belize, specifically in the sag-bottomed bowls, miniaturized feet-forms, and some design styles.

Temporally, it appears that the Isla Sphere was in existence slightly later than the corresponding New Town Sphere in Belize. Paxcaman ceramic material should not, however, be placed in Rice's Isla Ceramic Sphere (thus making New Town and Isla sequential). Contrary to Rice's claims (1979:72-82), the Tayasal data show that Paxcaman seems, at least in the Lake Peten region, to be a later extension of the New Town Ceramic Sphere in the Central Peten. In this light the Isla Ceramic Sphere is seen as having been intrusive to the Central Peten during the Middle Postclassic and probably representative of the incoming "Itza" population. The architectural remains found in association with Isla Phase ceramics, with their close connections to northern Yucatan (Bullard 1973:237; D. Rice and P. Rice, personal communication), appear to lend supporting evidence to this hypothesis.

The ethnohistoric documents state that Tayasal was the capital of the Itza and was located in a Lago Chaltuna. However, Lago Chaltuna is still not securely placed. Beyond this quasi-identification, the question of the location of the Itza capital Tayasal has ramifications not only for ethnohistory but also for archaeology. It does not appear as yet, however, that archaeological data support the traditional location of Tayasal. Whereas Jones et al. see an overselective use of ethnohistoric data to place Tayasal in Lake Yaxha, they are themselves overselective in their use of archaeology in placing Tayasal in Lake Peten. This is unfortunate because, due to the vagueness of ethnohistoric documents, it will ultimately be archaeology which will answer the questions concerning the location of Tayasal and the Itza.

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BEYOND WILLOW SMOKE AND DOGS' TAILS: A COMMENT ON BINFORD'S ANALYSIS OF HUNTER-GATHERER SETTLEMENT SYSTEMS

Polly Wiessner

It is suggested that archaeologists would benefit by conceiving organizational variation in hunter-gatherer societies to be the result of both organization around resources and organization around other persons in social relations of production. This approach allows for predictions to be made about the patterning of material remains which are the products of intergroup and intragroup interaction, such as internal site structure, profiles of exchange, stylistic variation in artifacts, etc. To illustrate this point, I outline a number of social strategies for reducing risk in social and natural resources and derive hypotheses about their material

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