

Maya lived as urban farmhands

Middle class thrived in huge planned city in Belize

By Tim Friend
USA TODAY

A husband-and-wife archaeology team has determined after 16 years of excavating a group of overgrown mounds in western Belize that the site was one of the largest cities of the Maya civilization and that it bore a striking resemblance to the planned designs of Washington, D.C., and Paris.

The design and sheer magnitude of the city, called Caracol, defy previous assumptions about Maya urban life, class structure and seats of power, say Arlen and Diane Chase of the University of Central Florida in Orlando.

"There has always been an argument over whether the Maya are urban," Diane Chase says. "One of the things we recognize is there are different kinds of urbanization. At Caracol we see a tropical form of urbanization in which the farmers lived and farmed in the city."

The excavations reveal that Caracol was organized with farmed terraces spread throughout the city and a prosperous middle class living in the lush farmed suburbs. The suburban neighborhoods were connected by plaster-paved causeways radiating out from the central palace area of downtown Caracol. At the end of the causeways, each suburb had its equivalent of a regional city hall and a bustling market.

The Chases estimate the population of Caracol was 120,000 — larger than any other known Maya city, including neighboring Tikal in Guatemala. At its height during the late classic period of Maya civilization, around A.D. 650, Caracol's urban area extended 6 miles out from the central palace, named Caana (Sky House in Mayan) by the Chases.

The poorest neighborhoods of Caracol appear to form a ring around the central palace's plazas, similar to depressed areas adjacent to modern downtown districts. The poor appear to have eked out a living by making crafts for Maya royalty and elite.

Caracol resembles Washington and Paris, which have streets radiating out from their central cores of power.

The archaeological evidence and stable-isotope analysis of bone, conducted by Christine White and Fred Longstaffe of the University of Western Ontario in London, show that Caracol had these distinct economic groups, similar to modern classes found in affluent societies. The bone analysis for diet reveals that the palace elite had the best diet, the poor had the worst, and the suburban farmers had a diet only slightly less nutritious than the royalty.

The affluent suburbanites also practiced burial rituals and owned luxury items associated only with the elite at other Maya sites.

The Chases say that other archaeological digs have not produced evidence of a middle class that participated in the ritual activities associated with Maya royal society. Nor has any other Maya site uncovered such extensive evidence of this unique form of Maya tropical urbanization.

The Chases say similar patterns of Maya urbanization may have existed elsewhere but gone unrecognized by



Urban planning: A Maya metropolis buried for centuries in the rain forest of Belize appears to have been designed similarly to such modern urban centers as Washington, D.C., and Paris, where streets radiate from a central power core.



Excavation: Archaeologists dig near Caracol, Belize, the site of an advanced Maya city whose peak population was 120,000 around A.D. 650.

scholars. Assumptions about the organization of Maya cities were biased by European attitudes, which incorrectly applied Industrial Revolution notions of urbanization, Arlen Chase says.

"Largely because Maya residential groups are generally dispersed over the regional landscape, some have argued that the Maya never had an urban population or only reached minimal urban status," he says.

For the Maya at Caracol, farming was the urban industry, and instead of living next to factories and refineries, the population was clustered around fields and the regional city halls, which appear to

have served as administrative centers for the urban farmers.

The Chases say that urban life in Caracol would have been reasonably comfortable and stable for its residents. The city persisted and expanded for more than 500 years. Bone analyses of Caracol's economic groups show that the population was generally healthy.

Maya elite had an unusual sense of fashion. Male and female infants' heads were elongated by being pressed between boards. Boys' eyes were purposely crossed by dangling objects in front of their eyes. Men used putty to form beaklike noses. Their teeth were



inlaid with jade and filed into decorative shapes. Women had their teeth filed to sharp points.

Maya civilization was developed by 1200 B.C. It extended from southern Mexico to much of Central America. The height of Maya civilization lasted from A.D. 300 to 900 and is known as the classic period. The civilization crumbled slowly instead of vanishing suddenly.

Tikal and Caracol occasionally engaged each other in war. The Chases say that the palace at Caracol was burned and hastily deserted sometime after 890. The body of a child was left unburied and untouched for more than 1,100 years on the floor of one palace room. The city's residents continued farming and living in the suburbs but with less prosperity than before.

See more at www.caracol.org.

Children's diary of a dig: Snakes and trails and scorpion tails

Growing up with parents who are more like Indiana Jones than the Bradys has its romantic side, but life in the field isn't glamorous. Journal excerpts from last year's field season by two of the Chases' three children tell the story.

From Aubrey, 8:

► Feb. 4 — I arrived at Caracol yesterday. Somebody stole our generator and TV. We had no light. We had to use lanterns and flashlights. Today I climbed a pyramid.

► Feb. 12 — I don't like the rain. It made my socks wet.

► Feb. 15 — The sun came out today. I'm so happy I could kiss it. I went to see the students again (again). Amy and I climbed (climbed) A6 (one of the excavated structures).

► Feb. 20 — Yesterday I went to San Ignacio. I ate 10 rolls at the Hotel. Last night I ate 2 potatoes and half a hot dog.

► March 6 — I've measured everything in Amy's lab. I like to use centimeters. It's easier to tell than inches. Inches are bigger than cm.

► March 9 — Yesterday night I got stung by a wasp 2 times. It hurt (hurt) when he stung me. Today Amy got stung by a scorpion (scorpion). Tanya killed the scorpion with a meshety (machete).

► March 10 — Mom and Dad took me to the Valentine (Valentine) group. It was named after Valentine's day. We walked a quarter of a mile past the big tree. I saw a skeleton, a termite nest, and an altar. I was tired.



Hanging loose: Adrian, 10, left, Elyse, 5, and Aubrey Chase, 8.

I think I lost 30 pounds!

From Adrian, 10:

► Feb. 4 — Dad bought a new generator! Now we have light! I saw a snake slithering toward me. Mom killed it.

► Feb. 10 — Yesterday night a very big tarantula crawled in the lab. This morning Elyse fell out of her hammock.

► Feb. 20 — It has been a busy week. It finally stopped raining, but the bugs are annoying. The shows are full of baby grasshoppers. I have caught up on all but one of my subjects. I am ahead in two classes. The generator is FINALLY working. Tim and Neil got

here yesterday. They brought a bigger TV. That will make tonight's movie much better. I hope we get to see *The Lost World: Jurassic Park*.

► March 3 — We took a trip out of Caracol on Monday. On the way we had car problems. We almost lost the front wheel. ... We stopped at three places to repair it. Two places didn't have the right parts. We ordered the part at the third place and Dad borrowed a spare tire. After that we FINALLY went to the hotel and went swimming. We also got to watch cartoons. On the way back to Caracol the road was very bumpy. I almost made it to camp before getting carsick.

► March 12 — Mom and Dad woke me up early to see the howler monkeys. At first all I could see were black shapes moving around in the tops of the trees. When it got light we went up to Central Acropolis. We could see all three monkeys clearly. ... Mom took me to the excavations. I found out that there are three ways to do an excavation. There are small test pits, big area clearings, and trenches. When we dig we look for the things the Maya left like pottery sherds, glyphs, stone tools, bone, and buildings. Sometimes the Maya built one building and then put another one on top. We excavate to bed-rock to make sure we have found everything.

► March 24 — It took a long time to drive home. We got in early this morning. It feels a little strange, but nice to be sleeping in a bed! I like Caracol, but I missed home.