
1 **BELIZE RED CERAMICS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR TRADE AND EXCHANGE IN THE EASTERN MAYA LOWLANDS**

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Various models for Maya exchange have been advanced. Many are predicated on long-distance exchange, but local exchange can also be identified in the archaeological record. Trade routes have been charted based on presumed access routes through landscapes and on the distribution of certain resources. While we agree that water-based river and sea trade routes were widely used throughout Maya prehistory, there also must have been overland portage and land-based trade routes. The successes of both Calakmul, and Tikal have been ascribed to their positions on key portage routes running from east to west. More recently, an east-west land-based route has been suggested for the northern flank of the Guatemalan Highlands. Resource-based models identify concentrations of key raw materials and examine the eventual distributions of products. Thus, salt was obtained from sea coasts and shipped inland. Obsidian was acquired from the Guatemalan Highlands and from central Mexico. Granite, slate, and shale were secured from the Maya Mountains. Shells derived from both the Pacific and Atlantic coasts. Finished products were also extensively traded both locally and at a distance. In this paper, we look at the interface between long-distance and local trade and exchange with regard to Belize Red ceramics, suggesting that the distribution of this pottery reflects both an east-west riverine-portage route and a land-based north-south route circumventing the Maya Mountains in an extensive trading system that was largely controlled by Caracol, Belize.

Introduction

Trade and exchange is usually defined in the archaeological record by tracing the sources and depositional locations of artifactual materials and by analyzing their archaeological contexts to identify their systems of production and distribution. Various artifact classes – shell, lithics, and ceramic – have been studied in an attempt to understand ancient exchange. The existence of foreign ceramics at a Maya site can be revealed by neutron activation (Bishop and Blackman 2002), but other factors also make for ease of identification. Perhaps the best known Precolumbian ceramic tradeware is plumbate (Shepherd 1948); we know that this pottery originated in the Pacific coastal plain of Guatemala and is found in archaeological contexts ranging from Chichen Itza in the Yucatan Peninsula to Tula in central Mexico. While it is easy to identify because of its unusual “glazed” slip, we do not know how or why it enjoyed such a wide distribution. In the Terminal Classic Period, decorative techniques and paste help identify ceramics that were also widely distributed, but the sources of production and methods of distribution for modeled-carved and fine orange ceramics have yet to be resolved.

Recently archaeologists have begun to comprehend that our past economic models, largely deriving from Polanyi (1957), are seriously flawed in that they most likely

underestimate the existence of market economies in the archaeological record (Blanton and Fargher 2010:207-209; Feinman and Nichols 2010; Garraty and Stark 2010). Stark and Garraty (2010:44, 51-52), following Hirth (2010), particularly note that market exchange should be evident for items such as domestic pottery, as “it is unlikely that ancient states or imperial powers invested in regular household provisioning of quotidian items.” The archaeologically recovered distributions of ceramic materials align well with the homogenous distributions that are to be expected from market exchange (Chase and Chase 2009; Hirth 1998). Thus, the mechanism for the transmission of most pottery vessels (including polychromes) in the Late Classic Maya world was primarily through market exchange - and not solely through gifting, feasting, or other minor redistributive methods.

In any consideration of the eastern Maya lowlands during the Late and Terminal Classic Periods, Belize Red ceramics inevitably surface. These redware ash-tempered ceramics are widely distributed, being recovered along a corridor that extends from a northern boundary with the Yalbac Plateau in central Belize possibly all the way to the Naco Valley in Honduras. Their area of distribution extends westward into the Sibun River Valley and throughout southern Belize. They are reported in archaeological contexts from Lubaanatan,

Nimli Punit, and Pusilha – and at least two burials at Pusilha contain a Belize Red vessel. They are exceedingly well represented in the Caracol sample described below, especially in the burials from that site (Figure 1), and are similarly found throughout the neighboring southeastern Peten. Thus, because of its widespread, yet differentiated, distribution, this regional ware can be used to shed light on Late Classic and Terminal Classic routes of trade and communication in the eastern Maya lowlands.

Identifying Belize Red Ceramics

As defined at Barton Ramie by James Gifford (1976:255), Belize Red ceramic materials are categorized as being members of British Honduras Volcanic Ash Ware. Belize Red may, however, be confused with other ceramic types. For example, Gifford (1976:255) noted that there was no paste difference between British Honduras Ash Ware and the Vinaceous Tawny Ware that was defined for Uaxactun (Smith and Gifford 1965:519-521). Both “are consistently volcanic ash-tempered (an outstanding feature)” and “surfaces are slipped and lightly polished, leaving a semi-matte finish” (Gifford 1976:267). However, whereas Belize Red evinces a red slip with a slight luster that is not glossy in finish, “Vinaceous Tawny Ware surface finish appears deeper tan in color” than Belize Red (Gifford 1976:267) – a distinction that may not be apparent in eroded and poorly preserved samples. The classification issue becomes tangible even in the initial defining ceramic study of Belize Red. At Barton Ramie, Chunhuitz Orange is included within Vinaceous Tawny Ware, but one of the reconstructable vessels classified as Chunhuitz is noted by Gifford (1976:268) as also being “probably a very weathered Belize vessel.” And, it is very possible that Chunhuitz Orange is differentially preserved Belize Red in many cases. For Barton Ramie, 9 types are placed within Belize Red by Gifford and 3 types are placed within Chunhuitz Orange. Belize Red comprises 38.78% of the sherds placed within the Late to Terminal Classic Spanish Lookout Complex at Barton Ramie; if Chunhuitz Orange is included with Belize Red, the two ceramic



Figure 1. Tomb from Caracol Structure F36, containing 2 Belize Red vessels at its western end

groups comprise 42.85% of the Spanish Lookout Complex.

Because of the large amount of ceramics that contained ash within their cores at Barton Ramie, Willey (1965:371, 373) suggested that Belize Red was locally made – and most subsequent researchers have concurred (e.g. LeCount 1999; Reents et al. 2005). But, neither the ash source nor the production locale has been firmly identified in the Belize Valley (Ford and Spera 2007). Sunhara (2003:133) analyzed Belize Red as part of her petrographic analysis of the Belize Valley, concluding that there had to be a “trade in finished vessels, rather than local production” – something that is also indicated in our Caracol data. As Sunhara (2003:144) commented, “the data imply the presence of regional markets or a type of redistributive system by which locally made pottery as well as extraregional imports circulated.”

Because of the early recognition of volcanic ash in Belize Red, a sizeable effort has been devoted to analyzing the origin of the ash that was used as a tempering agent. It is still not known how or where this ash was obtained, although El Chinchon (Illopongo) volcanic ash has been ruled out (Catlin et al. 2007; Ford and Spera 2007). Research on Belize Red, however, has led to the recognition of two paste varieties. One appears to have had a measure of ground calcite added to the paste as a tempering agent (Sunahara 2003). While the calcite ash paste variety is less common in the Belize Valley than the purer ash paste, it still is present in all vessel forms and at all sites (Sunhara 2003:97), thus suggestive of a possible second production locale or, alternatively, with inconsistent or unreliable ash resources.

There is a great deal of standardization of the forms that are found in Belize Red (A. Chase et al. 2005). The same kind of footed plate has been found throughout the area for which Belize Red is reported and many of the other forms are also fairly widespread. The standardized forms and minimal paste variation support the idea that there were limited production areas for these items. However, as noted above, any areas for the production of Belize Red vessels have yet to be identified. The fact that many of the Belize Red ceramics from Barton Ramie exhibit “crack-lacing” (Willey et al. 1956:380; Gifford 1976:255), characteristic of repair and continued use of vessels following initial breakage, suggests that these vessels became difficult to obtain in the lower Belize Valley, implying a point of origin somewhere else; alternatively, they may have become such a desirable trading commodity that, over time, fewer of these vessels were available for local consumption. Based on the numbers of Belize Red materials that have been recovered, the ceramics are being manufactured on an almost industrial scale somewhere within its distribution area. Based on the recognition that large-scale Late Classic ceramic production took place at Buena Vista del Cayo (Reents et al. 2000), Reents and her colleagues (2005:374, 378) make it clear that they believe that the Belize Red plates from Baking Pot (and elsewhere) were manufactured at that site or its immediate vicinity.

The fact that these ceramics are widespread areally and long-lived temporally, existing in some form from at least A.D. 650 through A.D. 900, is also suggestive of the long-term economic ties that existed in the eastern Maya lowlands.

Spatial Dynamics of Belize Red

Originally looking only to already excavated sites in neighboring regions, such as San Jose in the Yalbac Hills to the north (Thompson 1939) and Tikal (Culbert 1993) and Uaxactun (Smith 1955) in the Guatemalan Peten to the west, few ties to Belize Red were uncovered (Willey et al. 1965; Gifford 1976), leading to a focus on the ash paste and reifying the idea of Belize Red as a local production of the Belize Valley. However, excavations by Norman Hammond (1975) in the early 1970s at Lubaantun in southern Belize recovered 168 sherds of Belize Red, making up 1.24% of his total ceramic sample (N=13,567); neutron activation of these materials demonstrated that their paste was identical to the Belize Valley pastes (Hammond et al. 1975). At Lubaantun, most of the Belize Red was found within the central architecture and the most common form that was recovered appears to have been a footed plate (Hammond 1975:303-313). Elsewhere in southern Belize, Belize Red has also been recovered in a number of surface contexts (Bill and Braswell 2005:310) and in two burials from Pusilha (Braswell and Gibbs 2006:274). It is relatively common at Nimli Punit, making up almost 7% of the ceramic sample (Braswell, personal communication, 2011). It has also been recovered from within Stingray Lagoon in association with submerged settlement (McKillop, personal communication, 2011), presumably implying a commercial connection to the seacoast salt trade.

Even further south, an argument has also been presented that central Honduras was actively trading with the central Maya lowlands. Unusual marble Uluva vase forms, known to emanate from Honduras, occur within the ceramic repertoire of Terminal Classic Maya modeled-carved at Yaxha (Zalka 2008:267). Joyce (1986; Lopiparo et al. 2005) proposed that the Terminal Classic ceramics of Cerro Palenque, Honduras were related to the Boca

fine paste complex at Seibal. Sheptak (1987) has specifically argued that Belize Red was present at Quirigua, Guatemala, at Naco, Honduras, and at other sites in the Uluu Valley, but there are insufficient illustrations and descriptions to firmly establish this fact. Regardless, it is clear that Belize Red was somehow making its way to the southern limits of the Maya area at the end of the Classic Period. Thus, it was truly a widely circulated tradeware.

Willey and his colleagues (1965:371) noted that the widespread prevalence of volcanic ash within the Late Classic ceramics of the Belize Valley implied “a situation bordering on mass pottery production.” Again, almost 43% of the recovered ceramic materials from Barton Ramie representing the Spanish Lookout Complex (N=59,929) were Belize Red (N=23,240) or Chunhuitz Orange (N=2,441). The subsequent excavations undertaken over the years at numerous sites in the Belize Valley have validated the widespread presence of these ash-tempered ceramics throughout the region. Sunhara (2003:93) studied ash-tempered ware from Cahal Pech, Pacbitun, Baking Pot, Xunantunich, Blackman Eddy, Ontario Village, Floral Park, and El Pilar. LeCount (2010:218), using rim sherd counts from single occupation contexts, estimates that Belize Red and Chunhuitz Orange comprise 23.8% of the Late Classic ceramics and 14.8% of the Terminal Classic ceramics at Xunantunich. For Chan, Kosakowsky (2012) notes that Belize Red and Chunhuitz Orange comprise approximately 10% of the Late Classic ceramics; large numbers of Dolphin Head red-slipped ceramics at Chan, however, contrast with the Xunantunich pattern of using blackwares, emphasizing the variability that exists within the ceramic complexes in the upper Belize Valley. At Cahal Pech, “partially complete Belize Red bowls were extremely common” in the *in situ* debris excavated from the Plaza A floor (Audet 2006:156), although no proportion is provided relative to general sherd collections. For Baking Pot, Audet (2006:319-320) commented that 90% of the Spanish Lookout equivalent ceramics at the site were ash-tempered (15,575 or 17,227 sherds), with 80.6% of them being categorized as being Belize Red (N=13,885).

Belize Red also occurs as burial offerings within the Belize Valley, particularly at Barton Ramie and Baking Pot. At Baking Pot, Belize Red vessels were recovered from a cache and from a burial in 1961 (Bullard and Bullard 1965:16, 18). Of 6 reconstructable Belize Red vessels recovered during BVAR excavations at Baking Pot, 3 Belize Red vessels were recovered from Burial 1 in Structure 209 (Audet 2006:329-330; Reents et al. 2005:378). At Barton Ramie, 12 burials and 3 caches yielded a total of 27 reconstructable Belize Red vessels (including 2 Chunhuitz Orange vessels). The forms include dishes, plates, and cylinders. At Barton Ramie, 77 polychrome sherds and 1 restorable polychrome vessel (Montego Polychrome) were also included within the Belize Red Group. The more common straight-sided ash-tempered polychrome bowls (Xunantunich Black-on-Orange; Benque Viejo Polychrome) were included in the Chunhuitz Ceramic Group as Vinaceous Tawny Ware (Gifford 1976:267-272). Nine Benque Viejo Polychrome vessels were found in 6 burials (Gifford 1976:271); only 2 of these burials do not also include Belize Red materials, confirming their coterminous use (and presumably production). At Pacbitun a cache of 92 stacked vessels was placed in Structure 1 in a specially constructed chamber capped with limestone slabs; while Mt. Maloney Black was present most vessels were Belize Red (including its related types Planton Puctate, McRae Impressed, and ash-tempered polychromes); the cache chamber was placed approximately one meter above a Terminal Classic interment (Bu. 1-7) about mid-stair, thereby indicating a date of A.D. 800-900 (P. Healy, personal communication, 2011).

Belize Red vessels do not appear to have been placed as offerings at Buena Vista, Chan, or Xunantunich, highlighting the differences in Belize Red usage that existed between the upper and lower Belize Valley (Chase and Garber 2004). Belize Red, however, has great longevity in this portion of the valley and is noted as being a component of three Late Classic Ceramic Complexes (LeCount et al. 2002:47). One Belize Red form that appears to be fairly unique to Xunantunich is the footed incurved bowl (LeCount et al. 2002: Fig. 7a). Slightly south of the Belize Valley the presence of Belize Red is

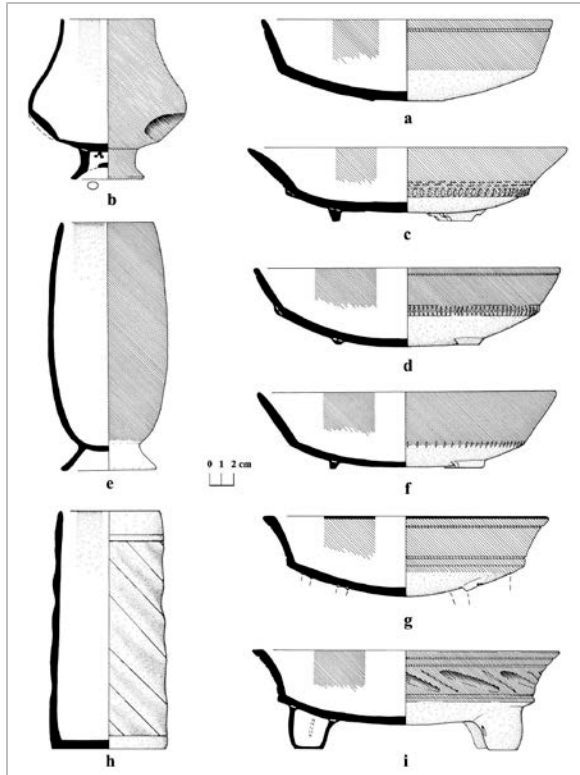


Figure 2. Late Classic Belize Red vessels from various Caracol burials

also reported from Arenal (Tashchek and Ball 1999) and from Minanha (Iannone 2005).

East of the Belize Valley, Belize Red occurs in smaller amounts. Within the Sibun Valley during the Terminal Classic, Belize Red comprises 4.85% of the ceramics at Hershey, 7.96% of the ceramics from Pakal Na, 1.39% of the ceramics from Pechtun Ha, 0.91% of the ceramics from Obispo, and 3.94% of the ceramics from Oshon (Harrison-Buck and McAnany 2007:123). It does not appear to occur in burials or caches at these sites.

Belize Red is present throughout the southeast Peten of Guatemala, but how much occurs there is unclear. Laporte (2004:216; Laporte et al. 1993:97) specifically notes that Belize Red and ash temper is present, but that these materials were all intentionally encompassed within Tinaja Red types. A brief perusal of the well-illustrated reports available in the *Atlas Arqueologia de Guatemala* permits the identification of 6 southeast Peten interments that contained Belize Red vessels (Laporte 2008; Vasquez and Laporte 2005). Two burials at Ixkun contained three Belize Red vessels (Ixkun

Bu. 232 contained one McRae Impressed and one Platon Punctated plate; Ixkun Bu. 227 contained a Platon-Punctated plate). Two interments from Sacul contained one vessel each (Sacul Bu. 190 contained a Gallinero cylinder; Sacul Bu. 191 yielded a Belize Red plate [identified as a Cameron Incised]). Ixtonton also produced two burials with Belize Red vessels (Ixtonton Bu. 25 contained a Gallinero cylinder; Ixtonton Bu. 31 included a Belize Red plate [identified as a Cameron Incised]). In addition to the presence of Belize Red in burials in the southeast Peten, the presence of sherds are also specifically noted for the sites of El Chal and Calzada Mopan. Thus, it would appear that Belize Red was widely available within the southeast Peten, confirming the participation of this area within the trading sphere of the Belizean eastern lowlands.

In the central and northern Peten of Guatemala, ash temper is common in the Tinaja Red pastes (e.g., A. Chase and D. Chase 1983:98; Culbert 1973), but unlike the southeastern Peten, Belize Red forms are generally not in evidence. No vessels of this type can be identified in the Tikal burials, caches, and special deposits (Culbert 1990). However, Culbert (1973: Fig. 13f) illustrates a possible McRae Impressed from Terminal Classic contexts. Only one possible Belize Red vessel can be potentially identified at Uaxactun (Smith 1955: Fig. 51c2), where it was typologically designated to be Cameron Incised of the Tinaja Red Group. Belize Red does not appear in the Lake Peten area (A. Chase and D. Chase 1983) and also has not been specifically noted from any of the Naranjo collections (Fialko 2006).

Finally, we turn to the presence of Belize Red at Caracol, Belize, where it was demonstrably a valuable commodity and tradeware. Thus far in the course of the project we have been able to document that it is plentiful in the site's archaeological record, occurring in small amounts in almost all Late Classic building fills, although never as the dominant ceramic type that it appears to be in the lower Belize Valley. We estimate that Belize Red makes up about 5% of the overall Late Classic ceramic sample. However, Belize Red is commonly included within Caracol's

burials and tombs (Figure 1). Thus far, we have been able to document 49 interments that contain a total of 87 Belize Red vessels (Figure 2). These interments are fairly evenly distributed throughout the core of the site. An additional 28 reconstructable Belize Red vessels have been recovered, mainly from the floors of Caracol's buildings (Figure 3).

The Caracol contexts permit a fairly tight temporal sequencing of Belize Red forms. At Caracol, Belize Red is present from the inception of the late Late Classic and continues through the Terminal Classic Period. When introduced into burials at the site, the initial Belize Red forms are quite variable. Footed dishes, footed plates, cylinders, and large bowls are present (Figure 2). By the later part of the Late Classic Period, however, the widely-distributed Belize Red footed plate has become quite standardized; it is slightly sag-bottom in form with out-flaring sides and hollow bulbous feet (Figure 2g). During the Terminal Classic Period, large Belize Red footed plates display horizontal bottoms and the frontal vents on their bulbous feet are often enclosed within rectangular incisions (Figure 3e). Smaller Belize Red footed plates (or bowls) also appear at the end of the Terminal Classic Period (Figure 3a-3d) and, in some cases, exhibit decoration that foreshadows the notched flanges and incised decoration known from Postclassic ceramics at Lamanai in northern Belize (Graham 1987:84,89).

What Belize Red Tells Us about Trade and Interaction

Belize Red ceramics were distributed across a broad regional area that undoubtedly enjoyed extensive internal communication as well as trade. However, the archaeological contexts provide additional information on ancient behavior. What is especially intriguing are the differences that existed between the upper and lower Belize Valley in terms of the incorporation of this pottery into the social fabric. In the lower Belize Valley, Belize Red is found in both domestic and ritual contexts. In the upper Belize Valley, it apparently was used primarily in domestic, rather than ritual contexts. The concentration of Belize Red that is seen at Barton Ramie and Baking Pot strongly suggests

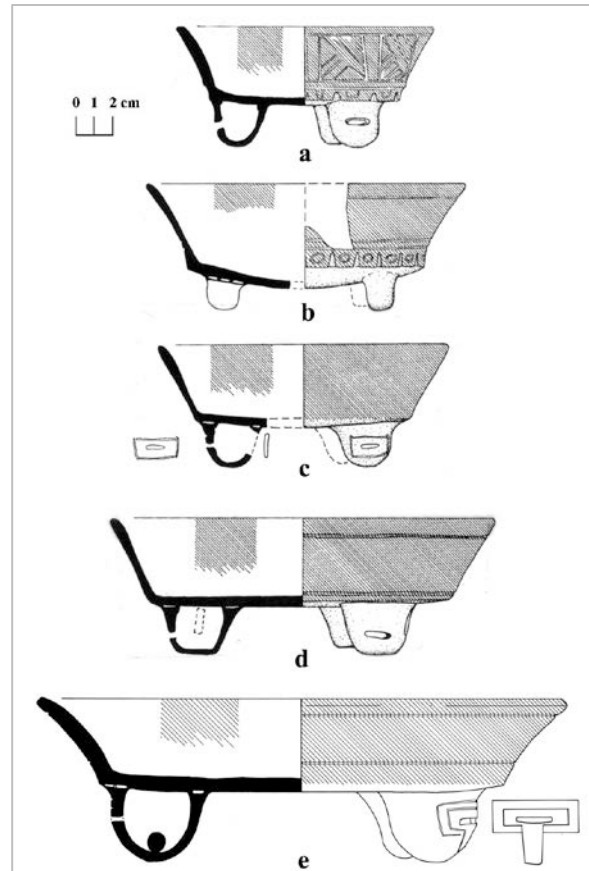


Figure 3. Terminal Classic Belize Red vessels associated with epicentral palace floors.

that it was easily available in these locales and that it was indeed produced nearby. However, massive amounts of this pottery entered the trade network and went inland along the Belize River and then southward into the southeast Peten and down the western side of the Maya Mountains. At Caracol, Belize Red was used domestically, but also was an exceedingly important ritual element – even more so than in the Belize Valley. The use of these vessels in burial contexts at Caracol and elsewhere outside the Belize Valley signifies that this ceramic type was a valued commodity. The study of isotope levels in Maya skeletons indicates that many ancient people moved between Maya communities (Cucina et al. 2011; Hodell et al. 2004; Price et al. 2008) and it may be that the use of Belize Red in burials at Caracol, at Pusilha, and at multiple sites in the southeast Peten parallels these population movements and the inter-connectivity of a Maya Mountain corridor.

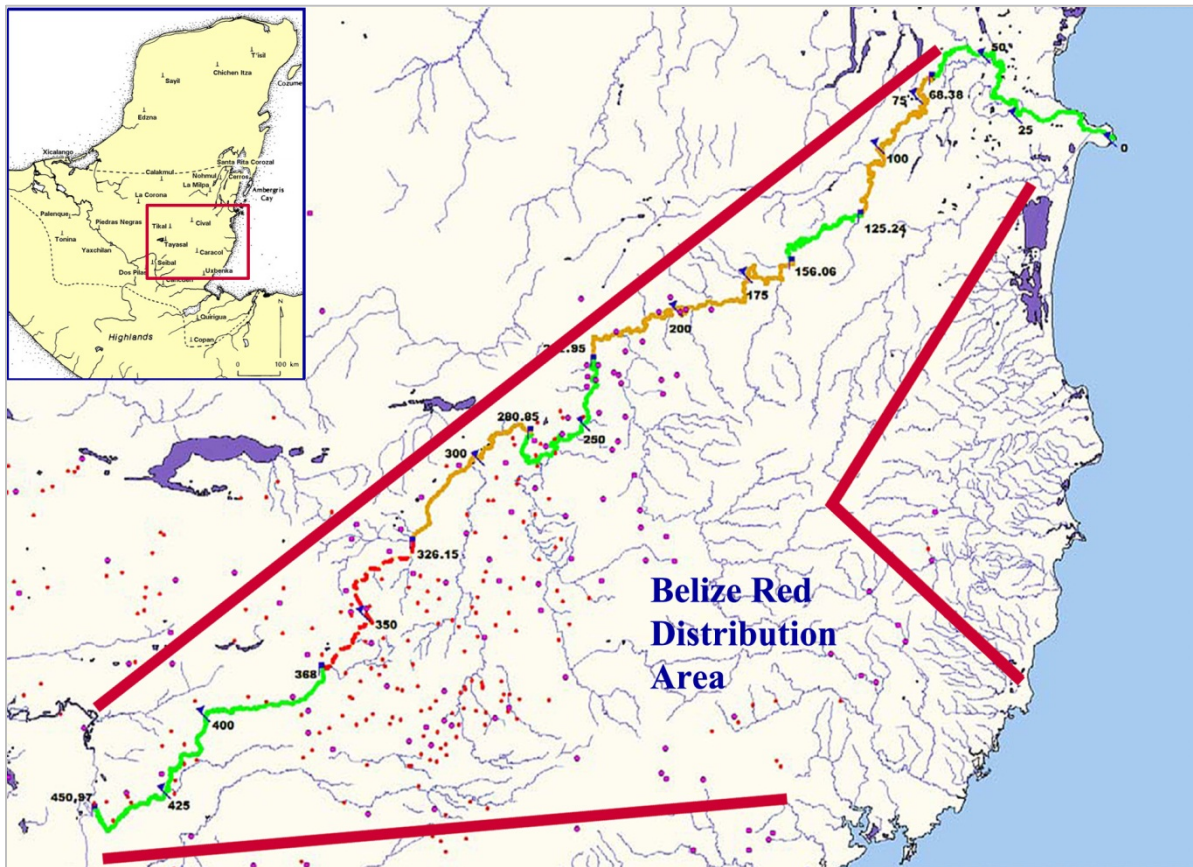


Figure 4. Riverine (409 km) and portage (41 km) trade route connecting the Caribbean Sea to the Pasión River using the Belize, Mopan, Salsipuedes, and San Juan Rivers (after Laporte et al. 2008); the distribution of Belize Red ceramics matches this riverine route and also suggests that it was additionally connected with a land route around the southern end of the Maya Mountains.

Examining the physical distribution of Belize Red – and the kinds of contexts in which it occurs – does permit the identification of a trade system that penetrated coastal Belize by means of the Belize and Sibun Rivers and also the southeast Peten by means of the Mopan River, as indicated by the presence of Belize Red at Calzada Mopan and points south. Where the Mopan River was no longer navigable, the route bifurcated into two overland routes through the southeast Peten (Figure 4). The first followed the edge of the Maya Mountains south, as can be seen by the presence of Belize Red at Sacul, Pusilha, Nimli Punit, and Lubaantun. The second went overland to the Pasión, using rivers to the extent possible, as seen in the presence of Belize Red at El Chal between the Salsipuedes and San Juan Rivers and at Ixkun and Ixtonton towards the headwaters of the Machaquila

Rivers. While Laporte and his colleagues (2008) argued for a primary route to the Pasión River in Guatemala that followed the Salsipuedes River, the distribution of Belize Red in the southeast Peten would suggest that the Machaquila River was used as well. In fact, there may be great time-depth for this latter route, as seen in the positioning of the Early Classic site of Tres Islas (with its Teotihuacan-related iconography) at the confluence of the Pasión and Machaquila Rivers (Barrios and Quintanilla 2008). The significant Teotihuacan presence at Caracol in the Early Classic Period (A. Chase and D. Chase 2011) and the heavy ritual emphasis on Belize Red in the Late and Terminal Classic Periods at Caracol strongly suggests that Caracol had a long-standing vested interest in these east-west trade routes.

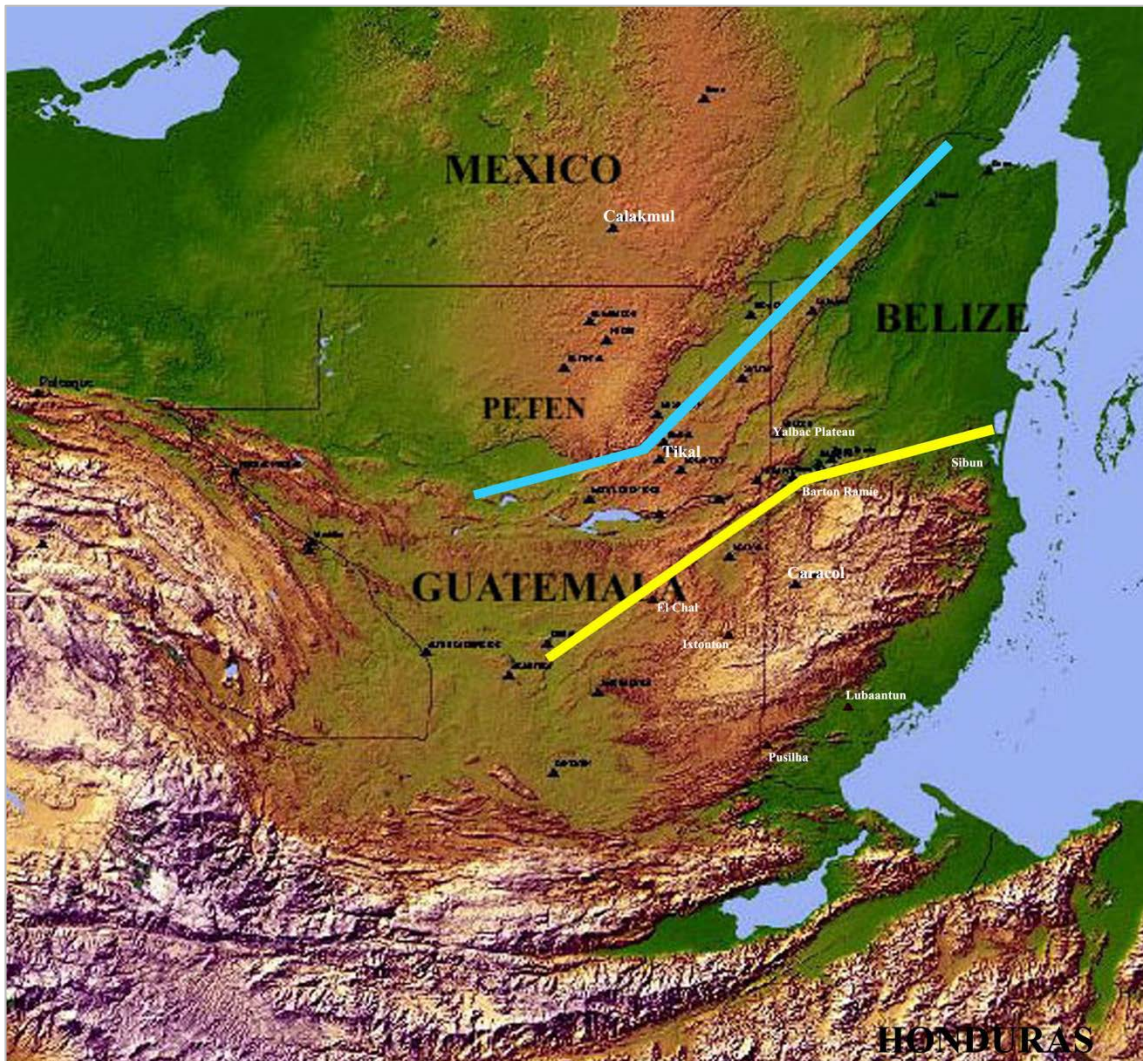


Figure 5. Two competing trade routes from the Maya heartland to the Caribbean Sea; both follow topographic features. The northern Hondo-Azul Trade System was anchored by Tikal, Guatemala and the southern Belize-Mopan Trade System was anchored by Caracol, Belize.

What is also significant is the recognition of at least two competing riverine-based Classic Period trade routes that integrated the sea with the interior (Figure 5), a more northern Hondo-Azul Trade System and a central Belize-Mopan Trade System. If Tikal was, in fact, a transshipment center for a water-based trade route to the Caribbean coast, that route would have passed through the Rios Hondo and Azul and did not encompass the Belize Valley, possibly explaining the different Late Classic ceramic spheres that are present in these two areas (Willey et al. 1967:301). To a large extent, these trade networks followed topographic features

which facilitated movement and communication. But, recognition of these trade routes also holds implications for how the centers that articulated with these routes developed and declined. Long-distance trade was certainly a contributory factor in the fortunes of many Maya sites. And, the distribution and archaeologically recovered contexts of Belize Red demonstrate that even a mundane ceramic group can help distinguish and reflect the broader processes that impacted ancient Maya civilization. As noted above, Belize Red is not really known from the Hondo-Azul Trade System.

Demarest and his colleagues (2008) have suggested that during the Early Classic Period, Tikal controlled north-south trade routes through the Pasion to Kaminaljuyu and along the eastern edge of the Maya Mountains to Copan. Recovered archaeological data from Caracol demonstrate both a Late Preclassic connection to the Guatemalan Highlands (A. Chase and D. Chase 2005:22) and a relatively early Teotihuacan presence (A. Chase and D. Chase 2011) that call this model into question, but that make it quite clear why Tikal might have attempted to bring Caracol into its sphere of influence. Caracol was powerfully positioned relative to a potentially competing trade network. The wealth of items in Late Preclassic and early Early Classic Caracol – and the implied strength of elite ties at these times – indicate the importance of Maya Mountain resources to this trade route. Caracol's independence from Tikal after A.D. 562 at the onset of the Late Classic Period (A. Chase 1991) would have effectively provided the site with control of any southern Belize Valley-southeast

Peten trade routes. And, the distribution of Belize Red ceramics suggests that these routes were still functional through the end of the Terminal Classic Period. As the exchange system for Belize Red crossed a range of environmental boundaries and encompassed areas with a wide variety of resources, the interconnectivity of this sphere of exchange, interaction, and communication may have helped the eastern Maya lowlands survive and prosper after other regions had already collapsed.

Conclusion

Long-distance trade routes are often credited with the rise and fall of complex civilizations. The widespread archaeological distribution of Belize Red ceramics reflects the existence of one such long-distance trade route within the Maya area, an extensive trade system that must have articulated with local markets. Given the importance of Belize Red in the ancient funerary rituals of the Belize Valley, Caracol, and the southeast Peten, other cultural elements – and even people – may have been shared throughout the region in which these ceramics are found. The widespread use of

Belize Red by the ancient inhabitants of Caracol also helps us understand why the site may have been established at the eastern edge of the Maya Mountains; Caracol was strategically sited in the Vaca Plateau so as to funnel key resources from east to west. The Belize-Mopan Trade System that is represented in the distribution of Belize Red ceramics was probably the same system that was used to transport other important resources that were obtained from the Maya Mountains. There was great antiquity to this trade system, extending back to at least the Late Preclassic Period; by the Late Classic Period, southern Belize was also included within its sphere. The broader Belize Red distribution and archaeological contexts indicate that this trade system was still in use at the end of the Terminal Classic Period. Thus, the Belize Red ceramic group serves as both a proxy for this trade system and as a symbol for the interconnectedness of the eastern Maya lowlands with the rest of Mesoamerica.

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