

The Classic Maya City: Reconsidering the "Mesoamerican Urban Tradition"

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There has been much speculation about the levels of cultural complexity and degrees of urbanism achieved in ancient Mesoamerica. Contrast has often been drawn between the civilizations of highland Mexico and the Maya lowlands of southern Mexico, Guatemala, and Belize. Some researchers have asserted that the Maya attained a lesser cultural development, only reaching the stage of an advanced chiefdom. Similarly, major Maya centers have sometimes been described as nonurban or even as vacant ceremonial centers. None of these views are compatible with the Maya archaeological data base; rather, they reflect ethnocentric beliefs about the nature of tropical lowlands and the evolution of civilization and urbanism. Unfortunately, they have been resurrected in a recent article by Sanders and Webster (1988).

Although Sanders and Webster (1988:521) assert that "the Mesoamerican urban tradition was a highly distinctive one compared to similar Old World traditions," they proceed to superimpose Fox's (1977) essentially Old World categorization on the New World situation, which they bolster with African ethnographic examples. Although Fox (1977) defined three distinct kinds of "pre-industrial" city for the Old World, Sanders and Webster find no real examples of any "mercantile" city in Mesoamerica and only three possible examples (Teotihuacán, Tula, Tenochtitlán) of an "administrative" city, all in or near the Valley of Mexico (see also Sanders and Santley 1983); Marcus (1983:210) would add Cholula, again in highland Mexico. Thus, apart from four potential exceptions, Sanders and Webster would lump all Mesoamerican urban centers into a single type—the "regal-

ritual" city. We suggest that Sanders and Webster's use of Fox's typology results in a caricature of the actual situation (cf. Goodenough 1970:105, 119, 129). Whether or not the typology is up to the job of doing more than just this remains open.

The "regal-ritual" cities described by Fox are neither homologous, analogous, nor congruous with the cities found in Mesoamerica. As Blanton et al. (1981:142) previously pointed out, not just Teotihuacán, Tenochtitlán, Tula, and Cholula, but "almost all the leading Mesoamerican urban centers were mainly administrative places." In the Maya lowlands, most are clearly more than simply "small places, hardly larger than villages in their societies" (Fox 1977:40), nor can they be categorized by "architectural forms. . . identical to those found in the rural countryside, only writ large, . . . much of urban architecture" consisting "of the residences of the rulers and their immediate clients" (Sanders and Webster 1988:524). It is now well known that many Maya centers were seats of powerful ruling dynasties controlling polities that encompassed other smaller centers and even occasionally brought larger ones under their control. Substantial populations were incorporated into both center and polity, far more than could be administered effectively under the conditions presented by Sanders and Webster. Site planning and large-scale "public" works are also found at most Maya sites. Whether or not these have to do with ritual, evidence suggests that an efficient administrative and managerial staff must have been at work. Reviewing archeological data from Caracol and Tikal makes clear that any "Mesoamerican urban tradition" is characterized not by Sanders and Webster's description, but by complexity and variety comparable with that in the preindustrial Old World, albeit within very different parameters.

Tikal

From 1957 through 1969, Tikal was the subject of intensive investigation by archeologists from the University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania (Coe and Haviland 1982). Reconstructions of the site are based on a variety of data, including extensive regional surveys (Carr and Hazard 1961; Puleston 1983) and large-scale excavation of over 100 residential buildings, ranging from simple houses occupied by people at the base of Tikal's social scale to those inhabited by the ruling class, including the rulers themselves (Haviland 1970; Haviland and Moholy-Nagy 1987). Excavated, too, was a large sample of

other buildings, consisting of temples (including the royal cemetery), nonresidential palaces, a probable marketplace, groups erected to mark the passage of *kabans* (20-year periods important in Maya history), *chultuns* (underground chambers), a sweat house, causeways, reservoirs, and even superficially vacant terrain (Coe and Haviland 1982:23-41). Supplementary to all this were literally hundreds of testpits (Coe and Haviland 1982:appendix A) as well as intensive studies of Tikal's inscriptions and iconography (Jones and Satterthwaite 1982).

The nucleus of Tikal consists of a complex of buildings and plazas that, together, cover an area of close to 10 ha (Coe and Haviland 1982:37). At its heart is the Great Plaza, a huge open area about 160 m long by 60 m wide, which provided ample space for both political and ceremonial gatherings, but could never have accommodated all of Tikal's populace at one time. Associated with this plaza are most of Tikal's carved monuments, on which are recorded the political fortunes and ritual activities of the city's kings. The tombs of Tikal's earlier rulers lie beneath the various temples of the North Acropolis, a huge platform that rises some 9 m above the plaza's north edge. On the south edge of the Great Plaza is a complex arrangement of monumental buildings known as the Central Acropolis. At least one of its "palaces" was a royal residence (Haviland and Moholy-Nagy 1987), and some others may have served a variety of administrative and other functions, including men's ceremonial houses, priestly residences, schools for boys of noble parentage training for the priesthood, and storehouses (Harrison 1970:299-302).

Bounding the Great Plaza on the west is another large open paved area. Buildings on the edge of this West Plaza include another large "palace" and a small, apparently unfinished, temple. Adjacent to the Great Plaza on the east is yet another large paved area, at the intersection of causeways entering from the north and southeast. Built on this East Plaza was a second ball court, next to what appears to be a marketplace, an arrangement later duplicated in the Aztec city of Tenochtitlán (Jones 1985:50).

The central core of Tikal is surrounded by what has been called an "epicentral ring" (Puleston 1983:24-25) of monumental buildings no less imposing in their size, elaboration of architecture, and complexity of layout than those of the central core. These include temples and palaces, a triple ball court, and twin-pyramid groups complete with carved stelae and altars. Although some served as elite res-

idences, many structures did not. The full variety of functions served by nonresidential structures in this epicentral ring is not known for sure, but the possibility that they were the same as the functions served by monumental structures at the center of later Tenochtitlán cannot be ruled out.

Although a final population estimate for Tikal is not yet available, calculations based on the number of houses occupied contemporaneously within the boundaries of the site when the city was at its height (ca. A.D. 600-830) favor about 55,000 people (Culbert et al. 1989). Boundaries were clearly demarcated by the Maya themselves, who constructed dry moat and earthwork complexes to the north and south, which run for several kilometers between two swampy regions (*bajos*) that form natural boundaries to the east and west (Puleston 1983:24). These features delineate an area of about 120 sq km, within which settlement density was three times that of the surrounding, rural region (Puleston 1983:24). The number of people living in the surrounding countryside who were under the control of Tikal is not known, but there must have been many. Culbert et al. (1989) suggest a figure of about 360,000. What is certain is that the population of a "Greater Tikal" exceeded considerably the 60,000 figure given by Sanders and Webster (1988:543) as "the upper long-term limit for Classic Maya states."

Around A.D. 600, many houses located on prime upland terrain in the countryside around Tikal were abandoned; at the same time, the city population swelled to its maximum size. We have evidence for a substantial relocation of population from the countryside to the city, a shift that must have required political coercion. That relocation did not equal the shift at Teotihuacán (Sanders and Webster 1988:539), but the phenomenon is similar. It could not have been carried out by a ruler whose position and authority involved little more than "impressive pomp and circumstance" (Sanders and Webster 1988:524). Nor, we think, could construction of the impressive moat and earthwork complexes.

Domestic architecture at Tikal reflects a wide range of social statuses. At one end of a continuum are houses built entirely of dressed stone masonry, including vaulted roofs, atop large platforms. At the other end of the continuum are dwellings built entirely of pole and thatch materials, without benefit of foundation platforms. The most common buildings in household compounds are houses themselves, although they sometimes include separate shrines and kitchens. Only in elite compounds, however, are separate shrines, kitch-

ens, and other domestic adjuncts common; in some they even outnumber the houses themselves. Evidence indicates that some relatively simple buildings served as quarters for live-in servants of far lower status than those whom they served (Haviland 1981); otherwise, rank differences between the occupants of individual households, whether of upper or lower class, were distinctly limited (e.g., Haviland 1988). Nor have craft workshops ever been found in elite household compounds.

At Tikal, convincing evidence exists that the manufacture of objects of obsidian, shell, and wood, as well as figurines, took place in specialist workshops located within relatively low-class households (e.g., Haviland et al. 1985). The production of polychrome pottery, another specialized occupation, was carried out by artisans of higher, though not elite, status. No doubt other specialized occupations existed, such as lapidary work and textile production, but where these were carried out is not known. All workshops found at Tikal fall within the limits of the city; none have been found in the countryside beyond (Coe and Haviland 1982:33). Clearly Tikal was not just a place of consumption.

Although some inhabitants of Tikal were craft specialists, probably more were farmers. The discovery of a raised field in the eastern *bajo* (Puleston 1983:11) suggests that many of the people who lived on its edge, where settlement was quite dense, tended such fields there. Craft specialists apparently were organized in corporate groups, probably lineages, and lived in household compounds clustered together into multihousehold units with populations on the order of 50 to 65 people (e.g., Haviland et al. 1985:184–185). Associated shrines or other nonutilitarian structures (Haviland 1972) suggest that these residential units also involved important ritual activities. By contrast, households likely occupied by farmers do not appear to be organized according to lineage. Cross-culturally, one of the most common functions of lineages is to act as landholding corporations, but at Tikal they may have lost this function to the ruling elite (once again suggesting that the power held by the rulers of Tikal was far from weak). To us it appears that among commoners lineages survived only where they assumed a guildlike function.

In sum, Tikal had both a large size and a large population and was a center of production as well as consumption. Its political authority was apparently strong and centralized.

Caracol

Another of the largest and most important centers and polities in the Southern Maya

Lowlands is Caracol (A. Chase and D. Chase 1987a, 1987b). Investigations indicate the rather rapid development of a complex urban form in the period between A.D. 550 and A.D. 700, apparently at least partially as a consequence of militaristic success (A. Chase 1986; A. Chase and D. Chase 1989). Caracol's development differs from Tikal's in that the site was a relatively small center in Early Classic times (A.D. 250–600) but blossomed at the onset of the Late Classic era to become the larger of the two cities.

Caracol was established during the Late Preclassic, and evidence suggests that the first settlers had a good knowledge of water management. Like other Early Classic centers of the Maya Southern Lowlands—including Tikal—Caracol exhibited an architectural form known as an "E Group" at its epicenter. This group is thought to have been used for astronomical observations, although other organizational aspects may also be inferred (A. Chase 1983:1236–1244; 1985:35–39). Thus, specialized architecture existed at Caracol (as it had at Tikal) even before its florescence.

At the very end of Early Classic times, Caracol engaged in a series of military adventures that drastically affected not only Caracol itself, but also the entire political balance of the Southern Lowlands (A. Chase 1986). In A.D. 562, Lord Water of Caracol defeated King Double-Bird of Tikal and perhaps destroyed many of Tikal's Early Classic monuments. Likewise in A.D. 631, Lord Kan II, the son of Lord Water, conquered Naranjo, an event recorded at both Caracol and Naranjo.

The textually recorded defeat of Tikal and Naranjo by Caracol corresponds with an archaeologically recorded period of political difficulties at Tikal (Coggins 1975; Haviland 1987) and an epigraphically recorded low period at Naranjo (Houston 1986). At the same time, the population of Caracol increased rapidly, massive construction was carried out, and large tracts of land were brought into agricultural production through an elaborate system of terracing. Caracol's development during early Late Classic times may be viewed as the imposition of deliberate urban planning.

Urban Caracol can in no way be construed as simply an elite household writ large. While the ruler and his extended family probably resided in the epicenter, the city itself stretched its tendrils 3 km in all directions into the surrounding countryside. Seven causeways, or roads, are known from Caracol. Among the many purposes these served, one was undoubtedly to expedite transportation from various parts of Caracol into the epicenter it-

self. Of five known causeway termini, two are situated less than 1 km from the epicenter and appear to be elite household groups. Two other termini, some 3 km from the epicenter, consist of plaza areas that rival those found in the center of the site. One causeway links Caracol with the main plaza at Cahal Pichik, more than 8 km away.

One intrasite causeway terminus, the Ramonal Plaza, was extensively investigated during 1987. Excavations indicated that it served neither domestic nor ritual functions. Moreover, the plaza and its associated buildings were constructed in a previously undeveloped area in conjunction with the construction of the causeway that runs into it—apparently as part of a planned effort. Likewise, the other known long-distance intrasite causeway terminus, which also appears to be a special-function plaza, was constructed in conjunction with causeway expansion. Thus, specialized architecture exists not only in the epicenter of Caracol, but also at the ends of its longer causeways. Neither domestic nor ritual in function, the architectural plans of these two termini are not replicated elsewhere in the core of Caracol. The distribution of specialized architecture, not attached to any single household, mirrors the wider urban and “administrative” nature of the site. Contrary to claims made by Sanders and Webster (1988:534) for “the essential weakness of Maya centralized rule,” the causeway and special plaza systems imposed at Caracol emphasize the centrality of rule as well as the strict control of outlying parts of the city maintained by the epicentral elite.

In contrast with arguments that limited labor was employed at Copán (Abrams 1987), urban development at Caracol required massive amounts of labor. Not only was its epicenter rebuilt, but a planned road system for communication with secondary administrative districts was purposefully established throughout the city. At the same time, extensive settlement and field systems were linked to the road system. As a result of this activity, Caracol quickly integrated a large area of land and a large population into an effective urban system.

The site of Caracol does not constitute its entire polity. It is clear from the epigraphic record that the sites of Hatzcap Ceel, some 10 km northeast of Caracol, and La Rejolla, approximately 11.5 km northwest, were within the realm, and presumably under the direct administrative control, of Caracol (Houston 1987). The pyramidal nature of this political hierarchy, with Caracol at the apex, is reflected in the lesser elaboration of interments

at the outlying centers; the elite are there, but they were not permitted, or did not choose, to employ the same scale of funerary chambers found in the capital city (A. Chase 1987).

Population estimates for Caracol may be derived from a sector of the site between the Conchita and the Pajaro-Ramonal causeways that has been completely mapped and well sampled by excavation. This area of 2.26 sq km contains 128 plaza groups with a total of 677 structures. Archeological investigation indicates that most, if not all, of these structures were in use between A.D. 650 and A.D. 700, during Caracol's apogee (A. Chase and D. Chase 1989:13). Seven of these mapped groups, with a total of 64 structures, however, may be considered “administrative” or “special-function” and can be removed from the sample, leaving a total of 121 groups with 613 structures that can be considered residential. Assuming that 10% of these structures were not occupied during Caracol's acme (and not considering the existence of vacant terrain constructions, which would substantially increase population estimates), 541 structures may be considered to have been occupied immediately prior to A.D. 700 in this area. This translates into a raw figure of 244 houses per sq km, which can then be translated into 1,220 people per sq km using a factor of 5 people per household.

Realizing that the Caracol core minimally comprises 28.29 sq km and more likely 50.29 sq km, and knowing that all of it is apparently as densely occupied as the Pajaro-Ramonal/Conchita sector (see also Healy et al. 1983), we can estimate that between 34,514 and 61,354 people lived in a 3- to 4-kilometer radius about the epicenter of Caracol ca. A.D. 700. Even assuming a relatively small polity of only 365.35 sq km about Caracol (a radius of 11.5 km—the basic distance between Caracol and its dependencies of La Rejolla and Hatzcap Ceel) and a figure of 39 occupied structures per sq km extrapolated for the rural region surrounding Tikal (Culbert et al. 1989), the minimum population of the Caracol polity would approximate 100,241 to 122,791 people. This is a very low estimate, the actual figure likely being close to four times as large. Even so, this demonstrates the large number of people within the Caracol political orbit.

Classic Period Maya Centers: A Reconsideration

Just as modern cities comprise more than just a “downtown,” Maya cities consist of more than just an epicentral area. When epicenter and core occupation are reviewed at

representative Classic Maya cities, the emergent pattern is quite distinctive, and divergent from the regal-ritual city described by Fox and adopted by Sanders and Webster. It is clear that lowland centers were populous places with a variety of status groups and not merely a limited group of rulers and associated kin, servants, and specialists.

While Fox stresses the unobtrusiveness of the regal-ritual city, everything in major Maya centers bespeaks obtrusiveness. Unlike regal-ritual rulers such as the one at the head of the Swazi state (Fox 1977:47-49), Maya rulers are very distinctive in their dress and other accoutrements (Schele and Miller 1986:67-72). Similarly, Maya cities are distinct from their surrounding countryside; some even had boundary-marking features such as the earthworks at Tikal. While ideological aspects may be stressed in both the regal-ritual city and the Maya city, again the monumentality seen in the central architecture of a Maya city directly opposes Fox's conception of the regal-ritual city. Maya cities also contain distinct administrative areas and a hierarchical distribution of such areas; the site epicenter in most Maya centers is far more than a humble household on a larger scale.

Maya cities were not wholly dependent on outside producers; witness the presence of agricultural terraces within the site core of Caracol, the presence of farmers living within Tikal and Caracol, and the evidence of specialized workshops within many Maya centers. Maya producers were not located solely in proximity to elite households, as is claimed for Copán (Sanders and Webster 1988:534). There are workshop and production loci in varying locations and situations within a Maya urban setting; at Tikal, they *never* were attached to elite households. Sanders and Webster's statements about Maya production systems and trade are also inaccurate, as they ignore alternative evidence concerning multi-cropping, terracing, and energetics, specifically in relation to the distance and quantity of items that can be carried by a single Maya trader (cf. Hammond 1978) and in the perhaps ethnocentric notion that human labor is always considered expensive.

That Maya sites are centers of communication and transportation is indicated to some extent by intrasite causeways, such as those at Caracol that connect more than just ritual areas or elite groups. Some intersite causeways, such as at Coba and Mirador, aid in defining extensive polities—again not consistent with the regal-ritual model. Further evidence for widespread communication among centers is evidenced in such things as the spread of a

unified system of recording the lunar count (Satterthwaite 1965:622). That Maya settlements could have different, but intertwined, functions is also seen in the archeological record in communities that are commodity-specific, such as the lithic production site of Colha (Shafer and Hester 1983, 1986); areas such as Pulltrouser Swamp (Harrison and Turner 1978; Turner and Harrison 1983) likely were functioning as food production centers; still other areas, such as the northern Yucatec coast, were specialized loci for salt procurement (Andrews 1983). This also reaffirms that production areas are not attached solely to elite households. Finally, while Maya polities may not have been the most centrally organized of state societies, for the most part they seem to have been more centralized than the regal-ritual examples cited by Fox.

There are problems inherent in fitting "real" societies such as the Maya within "ideal" dimensions or types. The Maya fit at neither extreme of Fox's (1977:36) segmentary-bureaucratic and dependent-autonomous dichotomy and do not match the characteristics of any of Fox's idealized types. To expect Maya cities to fit neatly into the regal-ritual type probably was not realistic, especially given the derivation of this type from an Old World data base. While Fox's dichotomies and typologies are perhaps useful in a general discussion of cities, they are distracting when applied to the specific case of the Maya, and in spite of Sanders and Webster's (1988:527) statements to the contrary, use of Fox's typology implies either a series of stages, as Fox outlines, or a limited view of cultural variability and resulting cultures; either choice entails an outdated and overly progress-oriented view of cultural evolution (cf. Dunnell 1980:42, Trigger 1984:278, 280-284).

In summary, the kind of "Mesoamerican urban tradition" described by Sanders and Webster does not exist. Yes, there is urbanism in Mesoamerica, and yes, it is different from that in the Old World. In fact, the urban form differs within Mesoamerica, but the "tradition" is neither adequately defined nor given the necessary and proper historical dimension in Sanders and Webster's consideration. Rather than arbitrarily masking the variability seen in the Maya urban form under a single overarching category (especially when it neglects the more urban end of the range of variation), researchers would be better served not only by explicating the extant differences among Maya cities and between Maya cities and other Mesoamerican urban forms, but also by exploring the striking dissimilarities

between Old and New World expressions of urbanism.

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