
1 **ARCHAEOLOGICAL MYTHS OF THE POSTCLASSIC PERIOD: BELIZEAN ARCHAEOLOGY AS "DRAGONSLAYER"**

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Archaeology undertaken in the country of Belize has changed the way in which researchers view and interpret the Maya Postclassic Period. Archaeologists working in Belize have successfully invalidated a series of once prevalent myths about the Maya, including: the Postclassic dating of Chichen Itza, Mexico; the scorched earth view of the Southern lowlands after the Maya collapse; and characterizations of later Maya civilization as declining, decadent, and depopulated. The past thirty years of research have caused Belizean archaeology to emerge as a significant force in rectifying our paradigms about the ancient Maya and, especially, the Postclassic Period.

Introduction

While much is known about the importance of Belizean archaeology in terms of our understanding of the Maya Preclassic Period (Awe 1992; Hammond 1985; Healy 2006), the significance of archaeological data from Belize in terms of our conceptualization of the Postclassic Period is frequently overlooked. Yet, within the last thirty years archaeologists working in Belize have recovered more original data relating to the Postclassic Maya than at any other point in the history of Maya archaeology (Morris and Awe 2007). These data have helped to provide fundamental shifts in the paradigms that were and are used to interpret this enigmatic time period and position it relative to the broader Mesoamerican world (Smith and Berdan 2003).

The Postclassic Period of Maya prehistory is first and foremost a temporal era. It is that period of time that exists from the end of the Classic Period until the advent of the Historic era. While the time period can be fairly well bracketed for Belize as being from A.D. 900 until A.D. 1532, there are methodological issues involved in identifying the two transition periods that make the material correlates of the Postclassic Period difficult to securely identify at both its beginning and its end.

For a variety of reasons, archaeologists in the Maya area have tended not to focus on the Postclassic Period. There has been a general predisposition towards viewing this era as being relatively unimportant. The site of Mayapan, dug by the Carnegie Institution of Washington in the 1950s as their final long-term project, also did little to alleviate this perception (D. Chase and A. Chase 2004b). In fact, the Mayapan excavations were used as confirmation for an older paradigm used in Maya archaeology that saw the Postclassic as being defined by decline, decadence, and depopulation ("the 3 Ds"; for critiques and review, see D. Chase 1981 and A. Chase and P. Rice 1985:1). To some degree this characterization was directly borrowed from an Old World frame of reference relating to the Roman and Greek worlds (see Proskouriakoff 1955). The use of such terminology implied that the Postclassic Period was less important developmentally than the early Classic Period: material culture had tumbled from its acme; lewd and lascivious behavior permeated society; and, much of the population had disappeared. Thus, archaeologists who bought into this 3-D model believed that Postclassic material culture was not well-developed, that Postclassic art and buildings were poorly constructed, and that a smaller population

meant a reversion to a less complex social order. These preconceptions were compounded further by the difficulty that Maya archaeologists had in even locating Postclassic sites (see Chase and Garber 2004:8). But, recent archaeological data from Belize have all but erased this earlier paradigm and its incorrect assessment of the Maya Postclassic.

Myth #1: Chichen Itza was a Postclassic Site

Among the first myths to be overturned by Belizean archaeology was the mistaken belief that the bulk of the archaeological remains at the Mexican site of Chichen Itza dated to the Postclassic time period. Chichen Itza had been incorrectly assigned a dating to the Early Postclassic Period by researchers from the Carnegie Institution, who relied heavily on ethnohistoric interpretations rather than on archaeological data. While it is true that parts of Chichen Itza were occupied in the Late Postclassic era, the majority of the architectural buildings are now recognized as having been constructed in the Late to Terminal Classic Periods (Cobos 2004). Yet, there is still a lingering perception among both Maya archaeologists and the general public that Chichen Itza existed on a Postclassic temporal horizon.

Even though some researchers had questioned the temporal placement of Chichen Itza as the only known “major city of the Early Postclassic period” (Pollock 1965:393, n.27), it was not until excavations were undertaken at Nohmul, Belize that much of the architectural constructions at Chichen Itza could finally be more correctly placed in the Terminal Classic Period. The excavations at Nohmul in 1978 and 1979 succeeded in finding a host of material correlates that could be used to realign the temporal framework that formed the transition between the Classic and the

Postclassic Periods. Two architectural buildings that were matches for similar constructions at Chichen Itza and almost nowhere else were excavated in one of the central plazas at Nohmul (D. Chase 1982a; D. Chase and A. Chase 1982). One of the Nohmul buildings (Structure 20) was an elite residential compound referred to as a patio-quad or a gallery-patio, an architectural form extensively documented at Chichen-Itza, but from no other mainland Maya sites. The other Nohmul building (Structure 9) was a round temple that shared almost exact dimensions and construction techniques with an earlier version of the famous Caracol building at Chichen-Itza. *In situ* refuse found in association with the Nohmul patio-quad (and duplicated in the core of the round temple) permitted the alignment of spatially distinct archaeological sequences from the Northern and Southern lowlands that clearly dated these architectural styles to the Terminal Classic Period (D. Chase 1982b; D. Chase and A. Chase 1982). The artifactual materials contextually recovered at Nohmul in association with these two buildings conclusively demonstrated that “Mexican-style” architecture at Chichen Itza was on an equivalent temporal level and must also date to the Terminal Classic Period (D. Chase and A. Chase 1982). What had been taken to be architectural hallmarks of a Postclassic Mexican influx into the Yucatan Peninsula (following Tozzer 1957) were placed into an earlier temporal horizon associated with events that were more likely linked to the end of the Maya Classic Period. Thus, archaeological data from Belize were responsible for re-dating a key Mexican site and for invalidating one of the initial – and still lingering – Postclassic myths.

Myth #2: The Totality of the Collapse

The ancient Maya did not disappear as a result of the Classic Maya collapse.

What was once viewed as a sudden and total disappearance of an entire people is now seen as a transformation that involved the redistribution of people over the landscape and a reformulation of organizational structures and beliefs. Again, archaeological data from Belize have been a key in documenting this transformation. However, recognition of Postclassic peoples has proven quite problematic for Maya archaeology.

After completing excavations at Barton Ramie in the early 1950s, Gordon Willey (1956:781) wrote a summary article in which he stated that no Postclassic materials had been uncovered at that site. His summary reflected the generally accepted paradigm which portrayed the Maya as having disappeared from the Southern lowlands following the Classic Period. However, ten years later this assessment was completely overturned in the initial archaeological report on Barton Ramie (Willey et al. 1965). During the analysis of the excavated ceramics, James Gifford (1976) was able to document the occurrence of Postclassic occupation in 62 out of 65 excavated mounds (Chase and Garber 2004:8). Subsequent research in the Belize Valley has recovered Postclassic occupation at many other sites (e.g., Aimers 2004). However, the inability of researchers to recognize Postclassic remains in the field is not uncommon; other archaeological projects in the Southern lowlands have had similar methodological difficulties in identifying Postclassic materials (A. Chase 1990). Thus, the older paradigm of total collapse in the Southern lowlands following the Maya Classic Period has been engaged in a long slow death.

In contrast to points further south, however, the inability to identify or to find Postclassic remains in the archaeological record never occurred in northern Belize. At the turn of the twentieth century, Thomas

Gann (1900) was already publishing recognizable Postclassic materials. Survey work undertaken in northern Belize also confirmed the widespread presence of artifacts and architecture dating to this late time period at many sites (Hammond 1973, 1975; Sidrys 1983). More importantly, both the Lamanai Project (Pendergast 1981, 1985, 1986; Graham 1987) and the Corozal Postclassic Project focused at Santa Rita Corozal (D. Chase 1981, 1984, 1985, 1986; D. Chase and A. Chase 1988, 2004a; A. Chase and D. Chase 1987) excavated and documented extensive Postclassic archaeological materials and their transformation over time. Many of the artifactual materials recovered were works of true art, meaning that the existence of Postclassic Maya in northern Belize could no longer be ignored or marginalized.

Prior to the 1970s, when Belize had been considered to be a backwater for Maya archaeology, the viability of the total collapse model for the Southern lowlands was never questioned. However, by the mid-1980s archaeology in Belize was surging and it became clear that the ancient Maya of Belize had been in the forefront of Maya cultural developments from the Preclassic Period through the present. It also became evident that the Postclassic populations in Belize could not all be ascribed to later population influxes, such as occurred in the Historic Period (Thompson 1972). Rather, the ancient Maya in Belize had survived and prospered at multiple locations and in large numbers past the end of the Classic Period. The myth of the total collapse was shattered.

Myth #3: The Postclassic was a Time of Decline, Decadence, and Depopulation

Almost all of our older models about the Postclassic Period have been discredited or overturned in the last thirty years. Our original understanding of the Maya

Postclassic was largely grounded in ethno history. The writings of Diego de Landa (Tozzer 1941), early Historic Spanish documents (Roys 1957), and Maya prophecies and astronomical tables (Roys 1967; Edmonson 1982) were combined to provide us with a version of Postclassic Maya society as living in many regional territories (especially in the Northern lowlands), having a variety of different socio-political organizations, being quite warlike, and being quite focused on prognostication and agriculture. The accepted model of early contact society was not based on archaeological data, but was instead derived from ethnohistoric interpretations combined with ethnographic data from more modern Maya communities. The ethnohistorically derived models and interpretations were also believed to hold true for the Postclassic Maya of Belize (as originally summarized by Thompson 1972). These same ethnohistoric sources were also used to portray the Postclassic Maya in terms of the 3-Ds and in opposition to the Classic Period. Any changes that had occurred to the Maya peoples did not enter into this original portrayal; neither did archaeological data.

The accepted wisdom of what constituted the Postclassic Maya was originally set in contrast to an equally strange picture of the Classic Maya. Until the later half of the twentieth century, the Classic Period Maya were often portrayed in popular literature as an almost utopian society who knew no war and were ruled by magnanimous astronomer-priests; their civilization had suffered a major collapse in the Southern lowlands and had eventually been reconstituted in the Northern lowlands. The ethnohistoric data showed that the Maya in the reconstituted Northern lowlands were at constant war with each other, while the Southern lowlands remained depopulated. The ethnohistoric literature also indicated

that homosexuality was introduced from Mexico; this was seen as being confirmed in the numerous carved phallic representations that were found as surface remains at sites in the Northern lowlands (e.g., Arden and Hixson 2006). Thus, in contrast to the Classic Maya, the Postclassic Maya came to be characterized as both warlike and decadent. The magnificent sculpture and polychrome ceramics of the Southern lowlands were believed to have disappeared, amounting to a decline in material culture. On the whole, the Postclassic Period came to be viewed in extremely negative terms and was usually talked about as "lacking" the esteemed hallmarks of the Classic Period (D. Chase and A. Chase 2004b:13).

That this model of the Postclassic is patently false is known largely from archaeological work undertaken in Belize. The work at Lamanai (Pendergast 1981), Santa Rita Corozal (A. Chase and D. Chase 1988), Ambergris Caye (Graham and Pendergast 1987; Guderjan 2007), Laguna de On (Masson 2000), and elsewhere in northern Belize (Sidrys 1983) has gone a long way to revitalizing our view of the Maya of the Postclassic Period. We can now recognize that Postclassic settlements were quite extensive and that Postclassic material culture was extremely expressive. We have come to view the Postclassic Period as a complex and multi-faceted transformation from the earlier Classic and Terminal Classic Periods (D. Chase and A. Chase 2006).

Postclassic settlements exist almost everywhere in northern Belize (see Sidrys 1983), but they are difficult to locate because many of these households were constructed in non-mounded situations and the foundations of many of these buildings were often no more than simple lines of stone. Maya archaeologists have tended to concentrate on mounded architectural remains, which comprise the bulk of Classic

Period households. However, Postclassic households were built directly on the landscape and were often not raised, meaning that many archaeologists have trouble locating these constructions because they technically occur in "vacant terrain." And, these non-noticeable "line-of-stone" buildings are also easily disturbed, meaning that areal excavations are often needed to recognize their very existence. This Postclassic focus on horizontal, rather than vertical, constructions means that standard archaeological methodology used in many excavations (focusing on test-pits and trenches) can often miss the remains of such edifices, even if they are in fact present. Thus, the Postclassic Maya of northern Belize have been referred to as the "invisible Maya" (D. Chase 1990), a label that can probably be extended throughout the Maya area. A focus on Classic Period mounds and the inability of many archaeologists to find and recognize Postclassic sites has meant that the population of this temporal era is probably severely underestimated. Thus, much of what is interpreted to be depopulation for this era may instead be predicated on methodological issues in Maya field research and analysis.

Rather than being characterized as something lesser than the Classic Period Postclassic Maya art was extremely complex and filled with iconographic representations that exhibit continuities to earlier times. New venues for expression opened through the use of metals for jewelry during the Postclassic Period. Polychrome painting did not end with the Classic Period; rather, it changed. Colorful murals were applied to the walls of many Postclassic buildings, as at Santa Rita Corozal (Gann 1900). And, polychrome painting was applied to a large variety of ceramics, but only as a post-fire decoration, meaning that it erodes from these ceramics in less than pristine conditions. The many elaborate ceramic

vessels from Lamanai (Graham 1987) and Santa Rita (Chase and Chase 1988) illustrate innovative and vibrant styles. Unlike the Classic Period, modeling of ceramics was common in the Postclassic, leading to the physical expression of many iconographic details that would never be found in Classic Period art. The modeling that was found in ceramics was also likely reflected in building decoration through the use of stucco. Besides being brightly painted, the upper facades of Postclassic buildings were likely decorated with thick coats of modeled stucco that have disintegrated under the onslaught of tropical weather. It is highly likely that the mural traditions of the eastern Yucatec coast (Farriss et al. 1975; Miller 1982) were also once found throughout the Postclassic sites of Belize and the Guatemalan lowlands.

In summary, far from being an era of decline, decadence, and depopulation, the archaeological data for Postclassic Belize indicate a time of vivaciousness, vibrancy, and vitality. Ultimately, it was the incursion of the Spanish and their introduced diseases that transformed a resurgent people into the pale shadow of their former selves. The pale shadow that came to be reflected in the ethnohistoric literature is not reflected in the archaeological record of Belize.

Conclusion

Several things conspire to prevent us from fully understanding the Postclassic Period. First, modernization is destroying many archaeological sites before archaeologists can excavate and analyze them. This is true of both Postclassic and earlier sites. Postclassic peoples enjoyed living in many of the same areas that today's modern populations have come to occupy. Thus, a seaside bluff becomes the breezy home for modern suburbia and obscures the earlier Postclassic remains; river valleys are bulldozed and plowed for crops and grazing

land, also up-ending fragile line-of-stone buildings. Second, there is a current archaeological focus on the more easily located mounded architecture and Maya Classic Period remains, often located some distance from modern settlements and disturbed only by looters (who can also see the mounded architecture and read the archaeological patterning). This focus on mounded buildings means that the unmounded Postclassic remains have witnessed little excavation. Thus, within most modern Maya projects, Postclassic remains are rarely encountered because they are not readily viewable on the surface and because they are usually not commingled with Classic Period settlement. Until research strategies are reframed, Postclassic occupation will remain largely hidden. Third, even the excavation methodologies generally used in Maya sites are not well-suited to the recovery of Postclassic remains. Maya archaeologists need to carry out more large-scale horizontal excavations and pay particular concern to line-of-stone constructions. The test-pits that are popular among many researchers can easily miss latest occupation. Until there is more of a focus on large-scale vacant terrain excavation, it is likely that the Postclassic Maya will remain "the invisible Maya."

Finally, if we are truly to move forward, our antiquated paradigms need to be put to rest. Rather than using recycled views of the Postclassic Maya, excavated data related to the Postclassic era – particularly from sites in northern Belize – need to be utilized and more fully digested for their significance to conceptualizations of ancient Maya civilization. We also need more archaeological investigation and descriptive publication of this key area of Maya prehistory. Luckily, the Postclassic Period in Belize is well represented by sites that remain to be found and excavated – and

future archaeologists will undoubtedly add to our understanding of this temporal era.

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