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Coastal Maya Trade

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CHAPTER 2

ROUTES OF TRADE AND COMMUNICATION AND THE INTEGRATION
OF MAYA SOCIETY: THE VISTA FROM SANTA RITA COROZAL,
BELIZE

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Theories concerning the development of Maya civilization have often viewed trade as a crucial factor for Maya development. However phrased, most treatments of the evolution of Maya society place it within a frame of reference which relies heavily on exterior trade and, by extension, influences from outside cultures, often perceived as being more powerful than the Maya. Frameworks for dealing with the origins of Maya civilization have called for the existence of "symbiotic" relationships between the highlands and the lowlands (Rathje 1971, 1972; Rathje, Gregory, and Wiseman 1978) or have sought to see Maya development as tied either directly or indirectly to a flourishing trade between central Mexico and Central America (Morley, Brainerd, and Sharer 1983: 247-249; Willey 1977: 415-416). To us, the exterior element introduced into Maya development and indeed into its very waxing and waning is unnecessary and tautological (see A. Chase, in press, for a different aspect of this concept). In fact, it can be argued that the predominant trade in the development of Maya society was not highland-lowland, circum-peninsular (Sabloff 1977), or pan-Mesoamerican, but rather coastal-inland trade within the lowlands themselves (Figure 2.1).

There are various kinds of trade that can be identified archaeologically; it is, however, long distance trade that is often most easily recognized. In Mesoamerica long distance trade is usually viewed in terms of the passage of elite goods, frequently between environmentally distinct areas. While this kind of trade has been offered as a catalyst in cultural development, the term itself can easily become a catch-all phrase including exchange at a variety of distances and among a series of distinct cultural contexts. Importantly, long distance trade may include both intra-Maya exchanges as well as extra-Maya transactions. Within this paper, a distinction is made

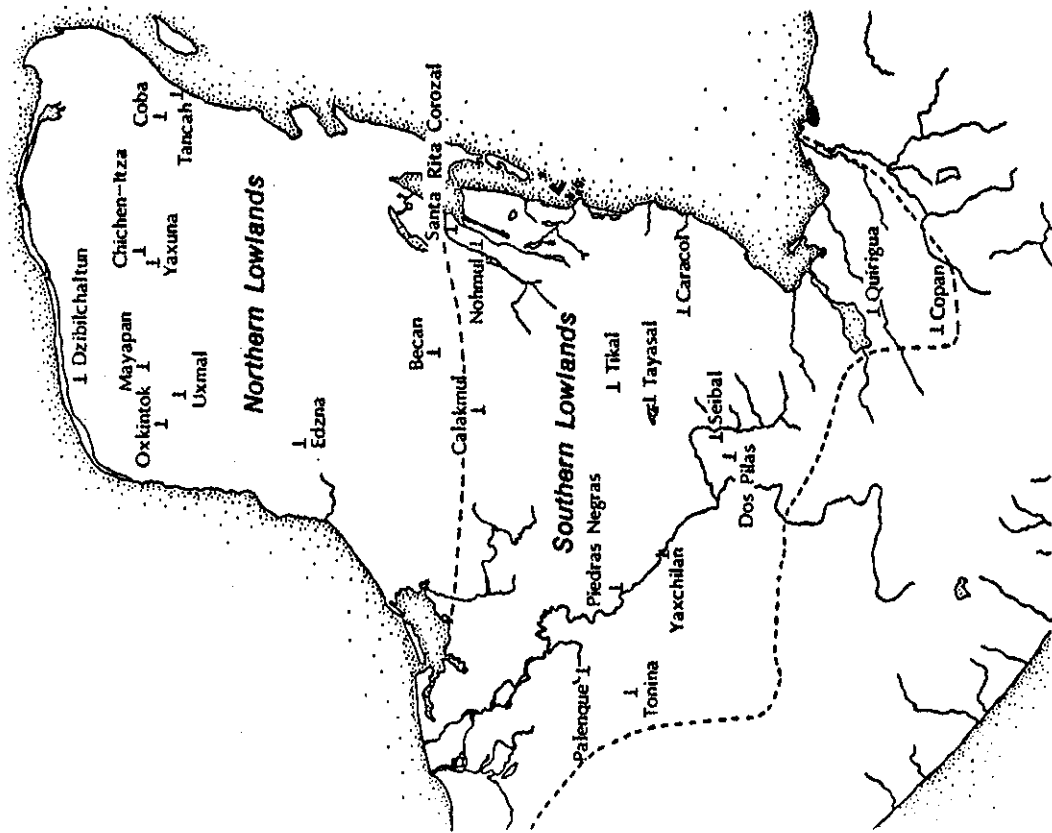


Figure 2.1. Map of the Maya Lowlands Showing the Location of Santa Rita Corozal Relative to Other Sites.

between intra and extra-Maya long distance trade and particular emphasis is given to lowland Maya coastal-inland relationships, both in general and as evidenced at the coastal site of Santa Rita Corozal.

Puleston and Puleston (1971: 333) once argued that the river systems of the Peten served as the primary routes for the initial settlement of the southern Maya lowland area. This postulation was made on several bases: first, the rivers provided a water and food source for human needs; second, their banks were extremely fertile for growing crops; and third, the inland areas away from the rivers provided additional plant and animal resources. While the Pulestons stressed the ecological advantages of rivers, even more important to the development of lowland Maya civilization was the access rivers provided for canoe travel and trade. It is clear that rivers initially served as the primary routes for both communication and integration among the Preclassic Maya. Yet, while many early settlements do indeed appear to be located in riverine locations, it has been well documented that some of the largest Maya centres, particularly those such as Mirador, Tikal, and Caracol, are NOT located on or near water sources.

To most researchers, the location inland away from water sources has been treated as an anomaly. How could such large concentrations of population evolve in a largely waterless lowland Maya environment? Archaeologists seeking an answer within a strictly cultural materialist philosophy often have harkened to exterior influences and trade in their search to explain Maya development (but, see Webster 1977 and Ford 1986 for alternative positions). As noted earlier, some see the rise of Maya civilization as a spin-off from trade relationships between the basin of Mexico and Central America (Sanders and Price 1968; Morley et al. 1983: 251-253) while others have posited it in relationship to exchange of utilitarian items between "resource-rich" highland and "resource-deficient" lowland Maya areas (Rathje 1971) or even between different parts of the lowlands themselves (Andrews 1984). Yet Maya ideology, in and of itself, may be utilized to cast a very different light on both trade and Maya development in the southern lowlands.

Maya ideology is predicated on a watery underworld (Schele and Miller 1986: 267). The Maya underworld was a place of the dead and a place of trial and

tribulation for passage to the thirteen layers of heaven. Water and water imagery figure most prominently in Maya cosmology. Classic Maya elite are shown with a water lily and fish in their headdress. In fact, it is the way that the Maya use a cosmological system based on water which distinguishes Maya religion from that of its neighbours, such as the Olmec and, on a later temporal level, the Teotihuacanos. Far from having cosmology predominantly derivative from the Olmec, Maya religion maintains its own series of symbols that clearly relate to the watery environment of its underworld.

With its cosmological dependence on symbols of water, it is not surprising that the Maya developed a relationship with the sea early in their history. Items from the sea were necessary for ritual purposes. Thus, the earliest routes of communication in the Maya area would have been between the inland area of the southern lowlands and the sea. Yet, because of the relationship of water with the underworld and its horrors, which were clearly visible in the sea, such routes were dangerous to the Maya. It may be postulated that one did not wish to live too close to the watery entry points for the underworld unless such a location was necessary for other reasons such as trade or the exploitation of sea resources. Part of the inland waterless location of pre-eminent Maya sites, therefore, may be suggested to have resulted from a desire to avoid casual contact with the sea and, to some extent, to large bodies of water. In such a scenario, early coastal sites would be expected to have functioned not solely to advance foreign trade, but also as portals to the underworld.

On a non-ideological level, the sea had practical importance to the Maya in that it served as a resource for at least one basic necessity, salt (Andrews 1983, 1984), and was additionally a means of communication and trade. Evidences of early trade between coastal and inland areas, however, emphasize not the importation of food items or basics into the hinterland, but rather the exchange of ritual items from the sea as these had supreme cosmological importance to the Maya because of their underworld connotations. Maya ritual caches contain stingray spines and sharks' teeth used for blood sacrifice as well as various shells from the sea, along with other precious items such as jade. Thus the sea was the source of implements necessary for sacrifice and items

from it were important because they were symbolically associated with the underworld (D. Chase, in press a).

It is not surprising that the Maya of the southern lowlands developed a close relationship with their eastern coastline from their earliest appearance. The eastern littoral of the Maya area could have been of more use to the Maya than the western Gulf of Mexico because of the existence of the largest barrier reef in the western hemisphere. This eastern littoral contained numerous species and a great variety of objects that could be incorporated into Maya ritual relating to death and the underworld. Additionally, the rivers flowing to the east were more easily navigable than those going west, thus strengthening this communication link.

Archaeology bears out the importance of the relationship between the eastern seacoast and the interior. As one would expect, initial ties are quite evident between the heartland of the southern Maya lowlands and the eastern coastal sites; this is especially seen in ceramics. Indeed, an argument can be made that what we now think of as constituting "Maya" culture and ultimately its distinctive iconography and ceremonialism originally developed along the northern coast of Belize. Support for this contention comes from several avenues, primary among them being ceramics. The earliest known ceramic complex in the Maya area, known as Swasey (Hammond et al. 1979) and recovered extensively from Cuello and Santa Rita Corozal, is clearly ancestral, or minimally related to the Mamon-related ceramics found in the central Peten (Chase and Chase 1987: 51). In general, however, Swasey-related ceramics are more elaborate than those found in Mamon-related complexes, but this would also be expected if such were associated with precocious cosmological development. When compounded with the fact that the earliest ceramic complex from the Belize Valley area, the Jenny Creek Complex, is extremely divergent from as well as coeval with the Mamon complex, it is evident that very strong ties existed between the northern Peten and northern Belize from the Middle Preclassic Period onwards.

In fact, the Late Preclassic development found at such sites as Uaxactun, Tikal, and Mirador is matched in northern Belize by Cerros, located directly on the coast, by Lamanai on the New River, and by Nohmul, which commanded the Hondo River. The strength of this

linkage is clearly manifest at Santa Rita Corozal by the onset of the Early Classic Period as the site shares ceramics, elite symbolism, and presumably architecture with the Peten. Importantly, Santa Rita Corozal also shares much "Teotihuacan" iconography with inland sites such as Tikal, not only in terms of ceramics, but also in terms of painted stucco work. Traditionally, the possession of such traits has been interpreted as being representative of strong contact with Teotihuacan elements. Part of this imputed association is due to the use of a paradigm which projected the rise and fall of Early Classic Maya society as totally dependent on a long distance trade relationship with a more powerful Teotihuacan (Willey 1974; Rathje 1977; Morley et al. 1983: 251). Recent work at Tikal in the Mundo Perdido area has provided great time depth and a developmental sequence for the cylinder tripods traditionally thought to be a hallmark for Teotihuacan influence (Laporte and Fialko 1987; Iglesias 1985). Such cylinders also are known from most Maya sites and are not necessarily found only in elite contexts. The appearance of tripod cylinders at a Maya site is not necessarily indicative of a direct relationship with Teotihuacan as some (Adams 1986) would argue; in fact, they would rather appear to be part of a pan-Mesoamerican development, perhaps even of Maya inspiration. While pan-Mesoamerican communication networks obviously existed between central Mexico, highland Guatemala, and the southern Maya lowlands, the contribution of the heartland Maya to such a system has been vastly under-rated in deference to a false theoretical picture of near total dependence on these other regions.

Northern Belize was linked to the Peten heartland from its earliest history, most likely because of inland-coastal trade necessary to maintain the Maya cosmological system. The obvious route for this linkage was the Hondo River, which was clearly the major route of communication between the Peten and the sea through the Early Classic Period. After the Early Classic, northern Belize adopted influences from the northern Maya lowlands and the routes of communication between the Peten and the sea shifted to the south, presumably using the Maskall and Belize River systems based on data from Altun Ha (Pendergast 1979, 1982a) and from the Belize Valley (Willey et al. 1965).

Throughout Maya prehistory certain sites were situated in auspicious locations on the sea. Some of

these sites were only important during limited eras of Maya prehistory, such as Cerros in the Late Preclassic Period (Freidel 1978) and Tulum in the early part of the Postclassic Period (Lothrop 1952: 6). Other coastal sites, however, such as Santa Rita Corozal, were occupied for the entire span of Maya prehistory (Chase and Chase 1986). Due to its seaside location and length of occupation, Santa Rita may be posited to mirror general Maya political and ideological circumstances over time as well as changing routes of communication and trade.

SANTA RITA COROZAL

The site of Santa Rita Corozal is situated on Chetumal Bay between the New and Hondo Rivers. In terms of postulated trade routes, Santa Rita was located in a perfect position to serve the large sea route up and around the Yucatan Peninsula and on to, and perhaps beyond, Honduras. It also commanded more local Maya routes, including riverine transport on the New and Hondo Rivers as well as overland routes to the north, at least during the early Historic epoch (Chase 1986). That the site was aptly situated is demonstrated by its long-lived occupation which had its beginnings in the Early Preclassic Period and continues today in modern Corozal Town. Given its location on the pan-Maya sea routes as well as in the middle of local riverine commerce and trade routes, one might expect Santa Rita Corozal to have been a well-populated and thriving centre throughout its entire history. However, Santa Rita Corozal does not achieve its peak population until the Late Postclassic Period (D. Chase, in press b), an era when the Maya set up many communities along the seashore. Why then did Santa Rita exist and, in some cases, prosper in earlier times and what was its wider role in terms of Maya society?

There is evidence of occupation at Santa Rita Corozal from the first times that the Maya can be identified in the southern lowlands. Prior to 1000 B.C. the site was the locus of a very small village. The people living at Santa Rita Corozal apparently lived on the high bluff above the bay and not on the water's edge itself. At least some buildings had raised stone base-walls and platforms. Burials of both men and women were found in semi-flexed position and were sometimes accompanied by grave offerings: pottery vessels and beads of shell or, more rarely, jadeite. Material culture from these early phases at Santa Rita

Corozal suggests that trade routes already existed by the beginning of the Middle Preclassic Period to bring in items from both near, such as chert, and far, such as jadeite and obsidian, but the long distance indications of trade and communication networks are far less than on later horizons. Pottery exhibits general and vague similarity to other early pottery from the interior lowlands such as in simple bowl forms, but the manner of execution varies considerably with each locality. Even other northern Belizean sites, such as Cuello, have very distinctive material remains within a similar overall tradition. Who were these early Maya at Santa Rita Corozal? Did they establish themselves in this area because of its potential for trade or for other factors, such as fertile land, sea breezes, or the availability of items from the sea? In the Early and Middle Preclassic Periods, these other non-trade factors most likely predominated. Nowhere in the Maya area does the outlook extend much beyond the local arena.

By the onset of the Late Preclassic Period at 300 B.C., Santa Rita Corozal was still a village, but its population was significantly larger. The quantity of items obtained from outside regions increased, particularly in terms of obsidian. While other aspects of trade are more difficult to identify, the presence of widespread communication networks that accompany trade is clear, specifically in terms of ceramics. Late Preclassic pottery at Santa Rita Corozal was nearly identical in form and surface treatment to Late Preclassic pottery throughout the Maya lowlands. What did this system of trade and communication mean to Santa Rita Corozal, besides increased awareness of the outside world? Did it bring Santa Rita Corozal more prosperity or a larger population than other sites? Perhaps. Nearly all burials contain pottery and some contain other items. Is Santa Rita Corozal the organizer of this system of trade? Or is the site merely one link in a larger system? There is at this point little to suggest that Santa Rita Corozal is more than a contented participant in a newly blossoming communication system that encompassed the entire Maya lowlands. It has been suggested, in fact, that the site of Cerros, across the bay from Santa Rita, was undergoing a period of rapid growth attributed to its pivotal role in a developing system of sea trade (Freidel 1978: 259-261). An alternative reason for Cerros' development at this time, however, may be couched in strictly ideological terms; its elaborate

iconography and structural monumentality in combination with its coastal location is likely related to its critical role as one of the Maya portals to the underworld during the Late Preclassic Period.

By the onset of the Early Classic Period (A.D. 250), however, Santa Rita Corozal ceased being merely a bustling coastal village and had replaced Cerros in the coastal-inland system of exchange. Clear differences existed between members of Santa Rita's population. A small segment of the people had access to, and were buried with, sumptuous trade items, whereas others were interred with a single pottery vessel or less. A program of monumental architecture complete with stucco mask facades was initiated in a central location at the site. By A.D. 450 one man felt comfortable enough with his status to proclaim himself ruler among rulers. He was buried with all of the trappings of office found at other major sites, much of the symbolism, such as turtles, shells, stingray spines, and God N representations (Figure 2.2), being directly related to the sea. Cultural affiliations during this time were clear; like Cerros' earlier elite (Freidel 1978: 257-258), Santa Rita Corozal's elite associated themselves with the Maya heartland in the Peten. This is well demonstrated in material remains and particularly in ceramics. Evidently, Santa Rita Corozal was involved in trading down the Rio Hondo into the Peten as well as along the coastal routes. Its ceramic repertoire varies greatly from what was known of other northern Belizean centres. Nevertheless, despite apparent prosperity on the part of a few, Santa Rita Corozal was not a huge population centre during the Early Classic Period and although it clearly had access to all of the trade items valued by the Maya, one finds oneself viewing the settlement as an outpost attempting to maintain all of the niceties of the heartland (Chase and Chase 1986: 8-12, 19).

Santa Rita Corozal's status remains much the same until sometime near the onset of the Late Classic Period, about A.D. 600. At this time, there was no singular focus of Maya culture in the southern lowlands, but rather much regionalism in both ceramic and architectural styles. Similarly, Santa Rita Corozal's outlook broadened and did not focus completely on the Peten. The earlier dichotomy in social status seen at the site also became less apparent as the population at large gained greater access to material items.



Figure 2-2.
An Early Classic Carved Stone Bowl From a Tomb in Santa Rita Corozal Structure 7: The Bowl Contains Water Imagery in the Depicted God N, an Old Man Emerging From a Shell. The Bowl was Probably a Product of Intra-Maya Trade. Height of Bowl is 8 cm.

It was in the Late Postclassic Period (A.D. 1200-1500), however, that Santa Rita Corozal truly came into its own (Chase 1981, 1985, 1986; Chase and Chase 1986). The Late Postclassic population at the site was approximately five times that of the Early Classic period and was significantly more dense. We know of the role that trade played during this period from ethnohistoric sources. The province of Chetumal with Santa Rita Corozal its capital, was an exporter of cacao and honey. But archaeology as well documents the widespread nature of trade in non-perishable items such as metal, jadeite, turquoise, shell, and pottery. Santa Rita Corozal was not a subsidiary center or trade outpost at this time, but rather a dominant community. Not only were trade ties evident during this period, but material culture shows indications of increasing regionality within a basic cultural frame. These regionalized styles, however, appear to mimic political boundaries rather than limits of communication or trade. There were, in particular, ties to the north in ceramic types and styles (Chase 1984). At the same time, however, other aspects of Santa Rita Corozal material remains are reminiscent of a much wider series of cultural associations (Figure 2.3). The Structure 1 murals encountered by Thomas Gann (1900: 663-677) are well known indications of a wider Mesoamerican style (Nicholson 1960; Robertson 1970); other artifacts and specifically stuccoed and painted ceramic objects may be similarly outwardly oriented. Thus, the routes of communication would appear to be wide, whereas there was diversification in the local inventory of artifacts.

It would, therefore, seem that it takes Santa Rita Corozal until the Late Postclassic Period to take full advantage of its coastal environment, at least in terms of increased population and extra-Maya trade. This is an interesting conclusion. Whereas trade was likely vital during both the Classic and Postclassic Periods at Santa Rita Corozal, the nature of this trade was somewhat different during the two times. During the Early Classic Period the only distinct extra-Maya trade items are obsidian or jadeite, whereas wider contacts may be indicated in ceramic styles: the primary systems of communication and trade appear to have been Intra-Maya. These Intra-Maya networks tied coastal Santa Rita Corozal with inland areas and sites such as Tikal. By the Late Postclassic Period, however, there is not only Intra-Maya trade, but increased indications of extra-Maya trade; during this later horizon Santa

Rita Corozal's ties are not to the inland heartland sites of the Peten, but to the Yucatan and beyond. Santa Rita Corozal itself is enveloped in a regional style, but with strong artistic ties to other areas in Mesoamerica. Thus, by the Late Postclassic Period a coastal-inland frame of reference was replaced by what some might call an international approach.

INTERPRETATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

What then can Santa Rita Corozal tell us about routes of trade and communication and the integration of Maya society over time? The answer would have to be "a lot," for the site has one of the longest continuous histories in the Maya area and is located in a prime nodal location in projected local and long distance trade routes. What the data do show is that some of our assumptions relating to the nature of Maya trade and its role in the rise of Classic Period civilization may be incorrect.

From the time it was settled around at least a millennium before Christ, Santa Rita Corozal existed as an important node for an ever expanding Maya communication network. From its very location the settlement could control, or minimally monitor, the Hondo and New Rivers as well as Chetumal Bay. With the depopulation of Cerros at the end of the Late Preclassic Period, Santa Rita Corozal controlled access to the whole of Chetumal Bay and its two adjacent river systems. Although the settlement was often just a common link within a pan-Maya system, during two vital points of its existence Santa Rita Corozal served a vital role in this network of communication and trade. During the Early Classic period the settlement was likely the most important node in the procurement of coastal resources for the interior heartland. Santa Rita Corozal may have gained importance at this time through being cast as a portal to the underworld because of its seaside location. During the Late Postclassic Period the settlement controlled coastal trade through its role as the capital of the province of Chetumal. During these two eras its role in Maya trade was very different from other times. During the Early Classic Period the community was primarily involved in intra-Maya exchange with the interior. Its small, but well-established Early Classic population would appear to mirror the fact that Santa Rita served as a major supplier of coastal items needed for Maya ritual. During the Late Postclassic Period, however,

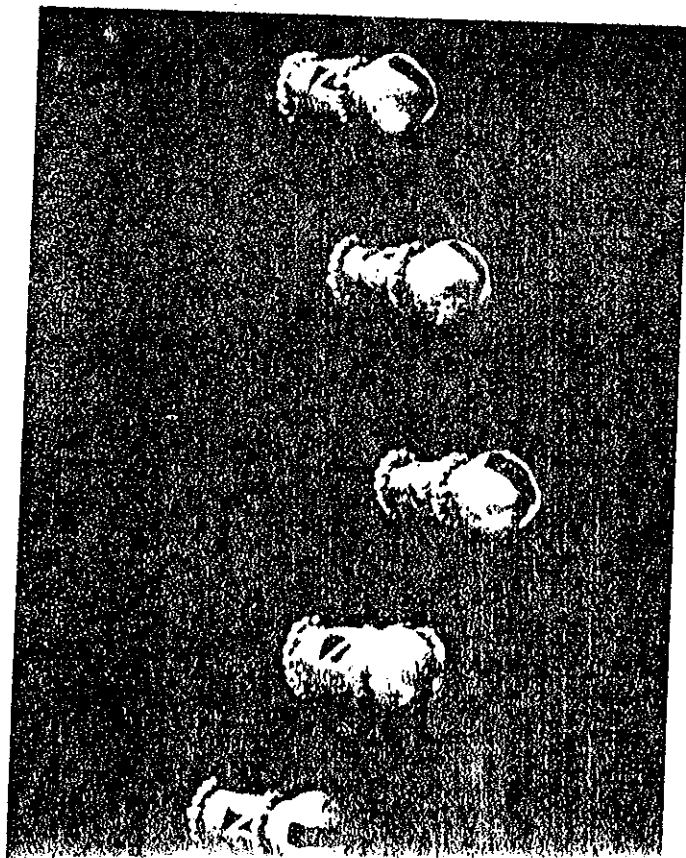


Figure 2.3. Postclassic Gold Bells From a Burial in Santa Rita Corozal Structure 216, Probably Products of Extra-Maya Trade. Height of Bells is 1.4 cm.

the settlement not only administered to cosmological needs but also served to administer long distance trade for the whole region and contacts were pan-Mesoamerican. The population boom witnessed at Santa Rita Corozal during this time may be at least partially attributable to its new role.

Whereas long distance trade may involve outside cultures, such contact need not be the key element for explaining the development of Maya society. We believe that trade did not come into existence to provide igneous or metamorphic stone to the people of the Peten heartland as was once postulated; these goods were incidental to the major role of trade in Maya society. Of real importance in coastal trade during the Preclassic and Classic Periods was a flourishing intra-Maya exchange network between the coast and the interior in shells, sea fan, sharks' teeth, stingray spines, and other items that were necessary and crucial for sustaining the Maya cosmological system. From their earliest appearance, the Maya maintained a tie to the sea. The cosmological importance of the sea when combined with the necessary intra-Maya trade that arose between the coast and the interior to supply ideological needs may be seen as giving rise to lowland Maya civilization for, more than anything else, this interaction fostered internal communication, contact, and development within Maya society.

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