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Classic Maya Seaports: Uaymil, North Campeche Coast



Research Year: 2001

Culture: Maya

Chronology: Terminal Classic

Location: Northern Campeche, México

Site: Uaymil

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Abstract

The small settlement of Uaymil is located on an island or petén in the northern part of Campeche. This former seaport is 25 km north/northeast of Jaina and 2.5 km inland from the coast. Over four weeks, between June and July 2001, we mapped the whole island and collected an excellent sample of cultural remains. When we consider how strategic Uaymil's position was on the north coast of Campeche, its internal layout, and the Terminal Classic period archaeological remains found at the site, all this suggests to us that Uaymil neither functioned as an independent coastal port nor a coastal port dependent on one political capital located inland. Rather, the evidence found at Uaymil suggests that it must have functioned as a trans-shipment station. This is to say that the function of Uaymil was to facilitate the movement of objects and merchandise that would eventually arrive at Chichén Itzá via Isla Cerritos. Apparently, Uxmal—the great capital of the western Maya northern lowlands—also benefited from the specific function that Uaymil carried out at the end of the Classic period.

Resumen

El pequeño asentamiento de Uaymil se localiza en una isla o petén en la porción norte de Campeche. Este antiguo puerto marino se localiza a 25 km al nor/noreste de Jaina y a 2.5 km tierra adentro desde la actual costa marina. Durante cuatro semanas comprendidas entre fines de junio y principios de julio de 2001, se recorrió y mapeó sistemáticamente toda la isla y se recolectó una excelente muestra de materiales culturales. Cuando consideramos la posición tan estratégica de Uaymil en la costa norte de Campeche, su característica interna y los materiales arqueológicos del período Clásico Terminal hallados en el sitio, estos datos, en conjunto, nos sugieren que Uaymil no funcionó ni como un puerto costero independiente ni como un puerto costero que dependía de una capital política del interior. La evidencia arqueológica hallada en Uaymil nos indica mas bien que este antiguo puerto prehispánico debió haber funcionado como una estación de transbordo, es decir, la función de Uaymil debió haber sido la de facilitar el paso de objetos y mercaderías que finalmente llegaban hasta Chichén Itzá via Isla Cerritos. Aparentemente, Uxmal —la gran capital del occidente de las tierras bajas mayas del norte— también se benefició de la función tan específica que jugó Uaymil a fines del período Clásico Terminal.

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Introduction

The small settlement of Uaymil is located on an island or petén in northern Campeche ([Figure 1](#)). According to the *Atlas Arqueológico de Yucatán*, its UTM coordinates are YN641633 (Garza T. and Kurjack, 1980:88). This former seaport is situated 25 km to the north/northeast of Jaina and 2.5 km inland from the present coastline of Campeche. For four consecutive weeks from late June through early July 2001, the whole island and all visible surface remains of at least 15 structures were systematically surveyed and mapped. Furthermore, we were able to collect from the surface an excellent sample of cultural materials made from ceramic, obsidian, basalt, chert, limestone, and shell.

The systematic surveying and mapping of Uaymil revealed that the settlement is approximately 300 meters long (east-west) and 250 meters wide (north-south), and lays upon a petén surrounded by water. On the surface of Uaymil we recorded the presence of at least 15 structures. Eight of these buildings (Structures 1-8) are situated around a plaza located slightly to the east of the center of Uaymil ([Figure 2](#)). In the center of the plaza we found the remains of an altar, which still has the remains of a stela on its north corner. Edwin Shook (1955) reported this stela when he visited Uaymil in 1955. Then—as now—only the lower part of the monument could be observed. In fact, the knees and lower body parts of a person as well as what appear to be one (or two?) highly eroded glyphs can be seen on this stela ([Figure 3](#)).

The other seven constructions of Uaymil are situated on or near the edge to the north (Structure 9), northeast (Structures 10-11), southeast (Structures 12-13), west (Structure 14) and northeast (Structure 15). An open space or large plaza characterizes the western part of Uaymil. This plaza is bordered to the east by Structures 1-9, and to the west by Structure 14 only, which has rectangular form. This spatial arrangement consisting of a large plaza bordered by the main structures of the site and a low, rectangular structure situated on the edge of an island is strongly reminiscent of the open space of the south part of Isla Cerritos on the north coast of Yucatán (see Andrews *et al.*, 1988). The following is a general report on the activities undertaken in the fieldwork at Uaymil.

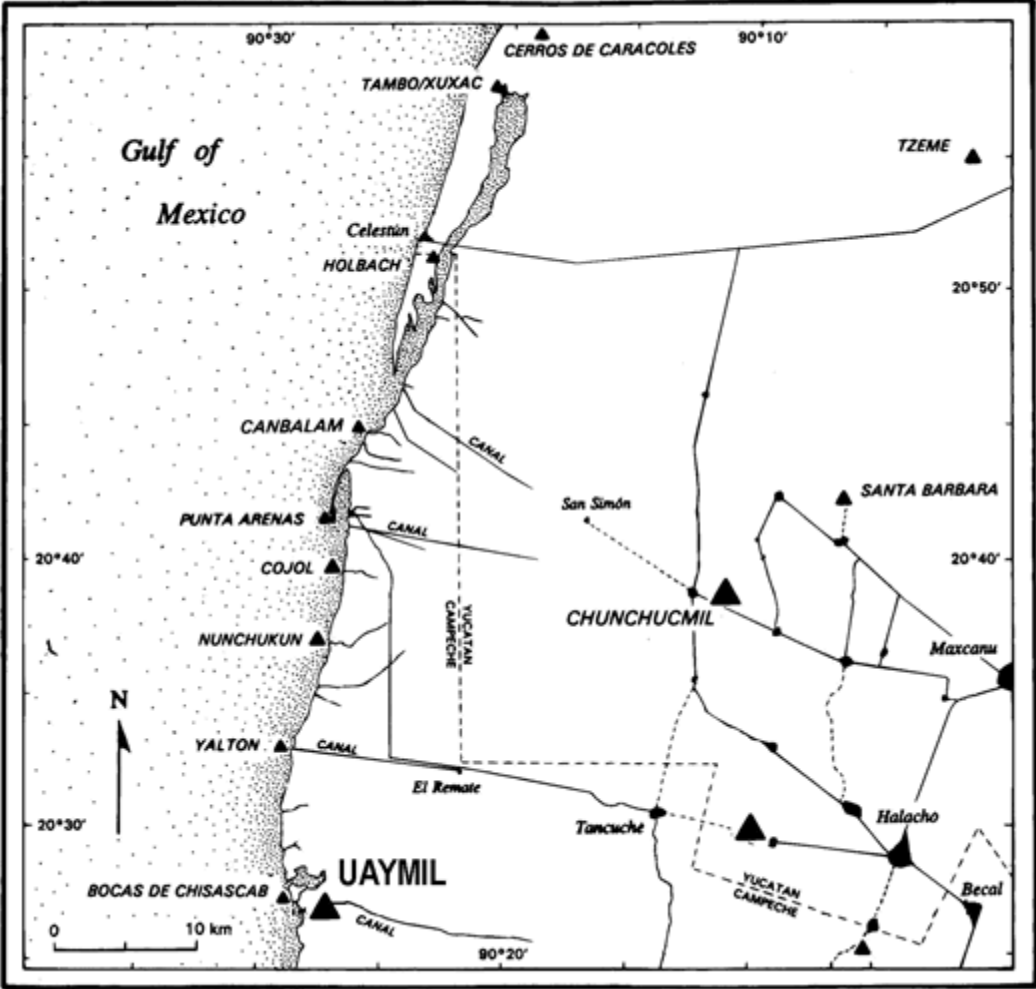


Figure 1. Location of Uaymil in Northern Campeche.

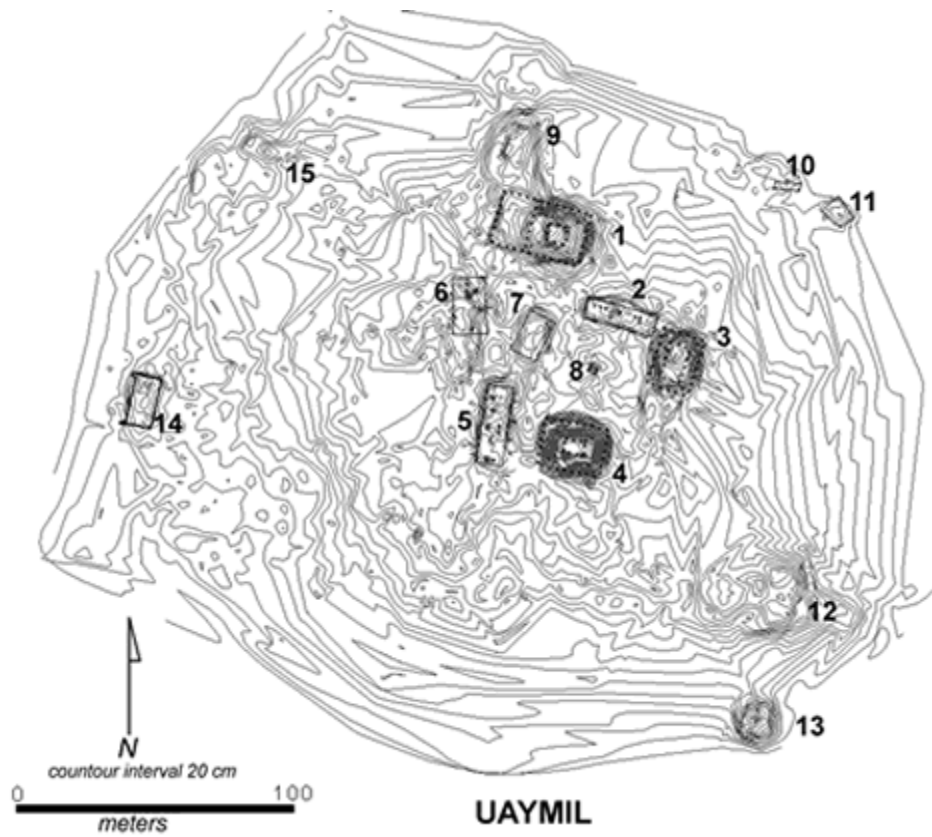


Figure 2. Map of Uaymil.



Figure 3. Stela 1, Uaymil.

Uaymil: Historical Background

The pre-hispanic settlement of Uaymil, Huaymil or Guaymil is mentioned by the name of "Guayman" in a map dated around 1734 (see Andrews, 1997:6). During the nineteenth century, the region around Uaymil was used for the exploitation of marine resources (fishing) and dye as there was an encampment which "probably served as the coastal center for Santa Cruz ranch" situated 17 km inland (Andrews, 1997:4). According to Millet Cámara (1994; see also Ferrer Berrón, 1978), the Uaymil region and Santa Cruz ranch were connected by a canal. Andrews (1997:3-4), on the other hand, believes that the nineteenth century encampment was more likely situated on Isla del Burro on the coast rather than on the pre-hispanic settlement which is surrounded by mangrove swamp. The next mention of Uaymil occurred when Nazario Quintana Bello carried out a brief visit of the site in 1937 (Benavides, 1988:258). Almost two decades after Quintana Bello's visit to Uaymil, Edwin Shook (1955:293-294) arrived at the site and mentioned the existence of two structures ([numbers 4 and 5](#) of our map) and the remains of a stela ([number 1](#)).

In relation to Structure 4, Shook (1955:293) noted that it consisted of a mound 12 meters high facing the plaza in which was found "*in situ* the bottom third of a carved stela". An examination of the contour lines and the location of Structure 4 in Uaymil leave no doubt that this was the building described by Shook, although the present mound is 9 meters tall.

As for Structure 5, we believe that Shook (1955:294) described this building, located a few feet to the west of Structure 4 and in the area to the west, which Shook considered to be "the edge" of the site. To some extent, Shook was right to state the latter since Structures 5 and 6 mark the western side of the only architectural complex in the site and face a large plaza which occupied the western half of the settlement. Shook (1955:294) wrote the following about Structure 5: "one partly exposed colonnaded building has a triple entrance formed by two columns, each a single stone reaching to lintel height. The doorjambs and lintels also are single, full-width stones, and the walls are faced with moderately well cut and dressed stone. The structure has two long parallel vaulted galleries with four or more columns acting as medial supports".

An examination of the architectural floor of Structure 5 shows it to be the second structure described by Shook in 1955. During fieldwork in 2001, we were able to document some columns still *in situ*. Other columns belonging to Structure 5, which have been removed from their original position, are still located near the building.

In his observations of Uaymil, Shook (1955:294) points out the presence of Chichen Slate and Fine Orange ceramics, Puuc style architecture, and one stela. With regard to this monument, Shook (1955:293-294) noted that its back and side faces are smooth. Only the lower part of the stela can be observed where the knees and lower body parts of a person can still be seen.

In 1957 Cármen Cook de Leonard (1959) apparently made a sketch-map of Uaymil and transported to Jaina a capital (number 1) with carved hieroglyphs on two sides (see Mayer, 1984; Figures 2-3). We suspect—due to its dimensions and characteristics—that Capital 1 comes from Structure 2 at Uaymil where we found a second capital (number 2) with the remains of eroded glyphs on one of its sides. Capital 2 is stylistically similar to Capital 1. ([Figure 4](#), [Figure 5](#) and [Figure 6](#))

In the middle of the 1960s, Victor Segovia Pinto (1966) carried out a brief visit of Uaymil. A couple of years after Segovia's visit, Eaton (1978) collected some surface materials consisting of artifacts made of flint, obsidian, limestone, basalt, bone, shell, and ceramics. Eaton (1978:46-48, 50-54, 57-58, Figures 19-c, 20-a, g, h, 29-c) described 1 complete as well as 1 broken points made of flint; 7 celts made of flint, 5 obsidian blades predominantly of green and light gray color; 11 manos made of basalt (N=5), flint (N=4), and limestone (N=2); 1 celt made of polished gray stone; 3 hammers of unspecified material; 1 manatee rib with incisions; 5 shell celts. Ball (1978:99), for his part, analyzed the ceramic materials collected by Eaton at Uaymil and drew attention to the presence of ceramic types corresponding to the Early Classic, Late Classic, and Terminal Classic periods.

Uaymil is mentioned again in the archaeological literature at the end of the 1970s as a result of the visit carried out by Anthony Andrews (1977:69, 1978:40-43). In this visit, Andrews noted that Uaymil was a civic-religious settlement occupied during the Early Classic, Late Classic and Terminal Classic periods.

Based on the ceramic as well as the architectural evidence, researchers such as Andrews (1977:60; 1997:4), Andrews and Vail (1990:42), Ball (1978:137-141), and Shook (1955) suggested that the peak of Uaymil occurred after A.D. 800 and was contemporary with Chichén Itzá and Uxmal. Our first results from the analysis of the materials collected in Uaymil confirm the proposal and we suggest that Uaymil had a specific function at the time of its peak.



Figure 4. Capital 2, Uaymil.



Figure 5. Capital 2 (detail).



Figure 6. Capital 2 (detail).

Uaymil: Description of the Structures

As noted above, we registered the presence of at least fifteen structures on the surface of Uaymil ([Figure 2](#)). Eight of these structures (Structures 1-8) are distributed around a plaza, which is located slightly to the east of the center of Uaymil. The other seven constructions are found on or near the edges of the settlement to the north (Structure 9), northeast (Structures 10-11), southeast (Structures 12-13), west (Structure 14) and northwest (Structure 15).

Structure 1

Structure 1 is situated in the north-center sector of Uaymil and a few meters to the north of Structure 7. Structure 1 is a mound approximately 6 meters tall.

Structure 2

Structure 2 is built on a rectangular platform orientated on an east-west axis. The remains of columns and Capital 2 are present on its surface. The capital is 65 centimeters long, 59 centimeters wide, and 20 centimeters thick ([Figure 4](#), [Figure 5](#), [Figure 6](#)).

Structure 3

Structure 3 is a building with 2 rooms (front and back) apparently connected by one entrance. The walls of these rooms are covered in finely worked veneer-stones of the typical Puuc style.

Structure 4

Structure 4 is a mound 9 meters tall.

Structure 5

This construction is a rectangular structure orientated on a north-south axis. Structure 5 still has in situ near its southern edge two columns both 60 centimeters in diameter.

Structure 6

Structure 6 has a rectangular ground-plan and is orientated on a north-south axis. This building must have had at least two rows of columns that ran parallel from north to south.

Structure 7

This building has a rectangular form and is orientated on a north-south axis. This construction is largely destroyed as a result of illegal looting.

Structure 8

Structure 8 is an altar with a square base situated in the central part of the main architectural complex in Uaymil. Stela 1 is associated with Structure 8 ([Figure 3](#)).

Structure 9

Structure 9 has a rectangular form and is orientated on a north-south axis. Some of the building's stone alignments can still be observed on its northeast and southwest corners.

Structure 10

This structure is a platform with a rectangular form. This construction is largely destroyed as a result of illegal looting.

Structure 11

This structure is a platform with a rectangular form. This construction is largely destroyed as a result of illegal looting.

Structure 12

This structure has a rectangular floor. This construction is largely destroyed as a result of illegal looting.

Structure 13

This structure has a rectangular base and is orientated on a north-south axis. This construction is largely destroyed as a result of illegal looting.

Structure 14

This structure is a platform with a rectangular base in the shape of a "C", orientated on a north-south axis. This construction is largely destroyed as a result of illegal looting.

Structure 15

This structure is a platform of rectangular base situated on an east-west axis. This construction is largely destroyed as a result of illegal looting.

Ceramics

A total of 459 ceramic sherds representing 36 ceramic groups were collected in different parts of the surface of Uaymil during the fieldwork carried out in 2001 ([Table 1](#)). The classification of the ceramic sherds followed the type-variety method which has been used to classify ceramic found both in coastal settlements as well as inland sites of

northwestern Yucatán (see for example: Andrews V, 1988; Ball, 1978; Ceballos and Jiménez, 2000; Smith, 1971; Williams-Beck, 1999). In this report we present the different ceramic groups identified, which we have assigned to their respective ceramic complexes so as to enable us to date the site of Uaymil.

The ceramic sample obtained in 2001 confirms what researchers such as Andrews (1977; 1997), Andrews and Vail (1990), Ball (1978), and Shook (1955) had suggested for Uaymil; the site flourished between A.D. 750/800 and 1000/1050. Furthermore, our first result of the ceramic analysis, along with the morphological and architectural characteristics of the site, leave no doubt that the apogee of Uaymil was closely linked to Chichén Itzá and Uxmal, the two great capitals of the northern Maya lowlands during the Terminal Classic period. Below are some general comments about the pre-hispanic occupation of Uaymil based on the ceramic analysis carried out to date.

CULTURAL PERIODS	CERAMIC COMPLEX	CERAMIC GROUP	TOTAL
Postclassic (A.D. 1050–1500)	Tases	Kukula	2
		Altar	2
		Baca	72
		Balancan	1
		Becanchen	1
		Cahalchen	1
		Cambio	2
		Cui	5
		Chablekal	4
		Charote	2
Terminal Classic	Cehpech-Sotuta	Chukul	1
Late Classic (A.D. 600–1050)		Dzitas	3
		Encanto	34
		Gris Fino	37
		Holactun	3
		Hunabchen	12
		Infierno	3

		Koxolac	15
		Muna	3
		Nimun	107
		Oxil	3
		Saxche	10
		Silho	67
		Teabo	3
		Tohil	2
		Tres Naciones	3
		Aguila	4
		Batres	11
Early Classic		Dos Arroyos	12
(A.D. 250–600)	Cochua	Maxcanu	23
		Palmar	3
		Tituc	1
		Triunfo	1
Late Preclassic		Polvero	1
(A.D. 300–250)	Chicanel	Sapote	3
		Sierra	2
		TOTAL =	459

Late Preclassic period (300 B.C.–A.D. 250)

The earliest occupation of Uaymil dates back to the Late Preclassic period. This occupation is indicated by the presence of ceramic groups such as Polvero, Sapote, and Sierra, which form part of the Chicanel ceramic complex.

Early Classic Period (A.D. 250–600)

The traces of the Early Classic occupation of Uaymil are based on the presence of ceramic groups Aguila, Dos Arroyos, Tituc, Palmar, Triunfo, Maxcanu, and Batres. Furthermore, Andrews and Vail (1990:42) also indicated that Uaymil was occupied during this period.

Late Classic Period to Terminal Classic Period (A.D. 600–1050)

Without a doubt, these two periods constitute the peak of Uaymil as an important coastal port on the north coast of Campeche. The presence of ceramic materials belonging to the Muna, Teabo, Baca, Cui, Holactun, Altar, and Balancan ceramic groups (to mention a few) from the Cehpech complex, and ceramic materials such as Tohil Plumbate, Dzitaz, and Silho from the Sotuta ceramic complex support the argument that Uaymil maintained close relations with Uxmal, Isla Cerritos, and Chichén Itzá (see also Andrews *et al.*, 1988; Ball, 1978:99, 131-141). In fact, considering the ceramic and architectural evidence as well as the internal structure of the site, Uaymil appears to have functioned as one more link in the chain of coastal settlements of northwestern Yucatán, which included Canbalam (Dahlin *et al.*, 1998) and Xcopté (Robles and Andrews, 2001). These seacoast ports facilitated the transport of objects between the lower Usumacinta region, the highlands of western Guatemala, the center of Veracruz, highland México, western México, and the center of Yucatán.

Obsidian

A total of 30 obsidian artifacts were recovered during the surface survey and mapping of Uaymil. All these artifacts are prismatic blades ([Figure 7](#), [Table 2](#)). Twenty six (or 87%) of the obsidian artifacts were preliminarily assigned to geological sources in México and Guatemala. Using visual criteria, and supported by the analysis carried out on the obsidian objects of various sites in the northern Maya lowlands, we have been able to identify the probable sources of 26 of the 30 artifacts (see also Braswell, 1997; 1999).



Figure 7. Obsidian blades.

The dominant source was Otumba (N=7, 26.9%), followed by El Chayal (N=6, 23.1%), Paredón (N= 6, 23.1%), Pachuca (N=4, 15.4%), Pico de Orizaba (N=2, 7.7%), and Ucareo/Zaragoza (N=1, 3.8%). The majority of the obsidian artifacts are from sources located in the central plateau of México (N=20, 76.9%), whereas the rest belong to the Guatemala highlands (N=6, 23.1%).

Table 2. Results of Visual Sourcing of Uaymil Obsidian	
<i>Probable Source</i>	<i>Total</i>
El Chayal	6
Otumba	7
Pachuca	4
Paredón	6
Pico de Orizaba	2
Ucareo/Zaragoza	1
Unidentified source(s)	4
<i>Total</i>	30

Basalt

A total of 26 basalt artifacts were collected during the surface survey and mapping of Uaymil. Amongst these artifacts the following deserve particular attention: fragments of *manos* (N=3), fragments of grinding stones or *metates* (N=21), a complete grinding stone, and an artifact whose function has not been determined ([Figure 8](#) and [Figure 9](#), Table 3).



Figure 8. Fragments of Metates.



Figure 9. Fragments of Metates.

Table 3. Basalt Artifacts Found at Uaymil	
<i>Type of Artifact</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Metate</i>	1
Fragments of <i>metate</i>	21
Fragments of <i>manos</i>	3
Unspecified function	1
<i>Total</i>	26

Limestone

A total of 24 limestone artifacts were collected during the surface survey and mapping of Uaymil. Amongst these artifacts the following stand out in particular: notched potsherds (N=14), round stones (N=4), pebbles (N=2), hammers (N=2), one fragment of a *mano* (N=1), and an artifact whose function has not been determined ([Figure 10](#), [Table 4](#)).

Table 4. Limestone Artifacts Found at Uaymil	
<i>Type of Artifact</i>	<i>Total</i>
Notched potsherds	14
Round stones	4
Pebbles	2
Hammers	2
Fragment of a <i>mano</i>	1
Unspecified function	1
<i>Total</i>	24



Figure 10. Notched potsherds made of limestone.

Chert

The sample of chert artifacts recovered during the surface survey and mapping of Uaymil include a total of 90 pieces. The collection of chert artifacts recovered during the 2001 fieldwork includes: flakes (N=42; 37 fragments and 5 whole), chunks (N=12), cores (N=10; 1 intact and 9 fragments), projectile points (N=9; 8 fragments and 1 incomplete), celts (N=8; 1 whole, 6 fragments, and 1 incomplete). The last types of artifacts include other implements (N=6; 1 possible knife fragment, 1 possible fragment of a mano, 2 possible blade fragments, and 2 fragments of polisher), and artifacts whose function has not been determined (N=3) ([Figure 11](#) and [Figure 12](#), [Table 5](#)).



Figure 11. Projectile points made of chert found at Uaymil.

Table 5. Chert Artifacts Found at Uaymil	
<i>Type of Artifact</i>	<i>Total</i>
Flakes	42
Chunks	12
Cores	10
Projectile points	9
Celts	8
Implements	6
Unspecified function	3
<i>Total</i>	90



Figure 12. Chert artifacts found at Uaymil.

Shell

A total of 30 pieces of shell, 23 whole and 7 fragments, were found during the surface survey and mapping of Uaymil. The sample of shell artifacts collected at Uaymil represents eleven marine species ([Table 6](#)). The 30 pieces of shell recovered include unworked pieces (N=13) of which 5 are fragments. We also identified 10 ornaments, 7 implements, and 1 semi-worked piece ([Figure 13](#) and [Figure 14](#), [Table 7](#)).



Figure 13. Shell pendants.

Table 6. List of Marine Species Found at Uaymil						
GASTROPOD						
SPECIES	F	E	F	E		Total
<i>Campeche Coast</i>	Unworked		Worked			
<i>Conus spurius atlanticus</i>	0	1	0	0	=	1
<i>Oliva reticularis</i>	0	0	0	7	=	7
<i>Pleuroploca gigantea</i>	1	0	0	0	=	1
<i>Prunum apicinum</i>	0	0	0	1	=	1
<i>Strombus costatus</i>	0	0	2	7	=	9
<i>Total</i>	1	1	2	15	=	19

PELECYPOD						
SPECIES	F	E	F	E		Total
<i>Campeche Coast</i>	Unworked		Worked			
Anadara notabilis	0	1	0	0	=	1
Anadara transversa	1	1	0	0	=	2
Crassostrea rhizophorae	0	2	0	0	=	2
Dinocardium robustum vanhyningi	3	0	0	0	=	3
Lucina pectinata	0	2	0	0	=	2
Mercenaria campechensis	0	1	0	0	=	1
Total						
	4	7	0	0	=	11



Figure 14. Celts found at Uaymil.

Table 7. Shell Artifacts from Uaymil	
<i>Type of Artifact</i>	<i>Total</i>
Pendants	8
Discoidal bead	1
Besote	1
Celts	7
Semiworked piece	1
	<i>Total</i>
	18

Conclusion

The cultural remains found at Uaymil showed the presence of Cehpech and Sotuta ceramic materials associated with obsidian and architecture typical of Chichén Itzá and Uxmal. All these materials relate Uaymil to Uxmal as much as to Chichén Itzá and, for that very reason, there can be no doubt that Uaymil took part in the distribution network of objects which arrived at the center of Yucatán from the southeast of Campeche, the Usumacinta region, the highlands of Guatemala, Veracruz, the highlands of México, and western México during the Terminal Classic period (A.D. 800–1050).

When we consider how strategic Uaymil's position was on the north coast of Campeche, its internal layout, and the Terminal Classic period archaeological remains found at the site, all this suggests to us that Uaymil neither functioned as an independent coastal port nor a coastal port dependent on one political capital located inland. Rather, the evidence found at Uaymil suggests that it must have functioned as a trans-shipment station. This is to say that the function of Uaymil was to facilitate the movement of objects and merchandise that would eventually arrive at Chichén Itzá via Isla Cerritos. Apparently, Uxmal—the great capital of the western Maya northern lowlands—also benefited from the specific function that Uaymil carried out at the end of the Classic period.

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