

## THE TRANSITION FROM THE LATE PRECLASSIC PERIOD TO THE EARLY CLASSIC PERIOD IN THE INTERSITE ZONE OF XULTUN AND SAN BARTOLO IN PETEN

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In the past decades, intensive research has been conducted around the Preclassic period Maya society. In Guatemala, a number of projects like those of Tikal, Uaxactun, Tak'alik Ab'aj, Kaminaljuyu, Holmul and the Mirador Basin, among others, have played a role in this resuming of the Preclassic period studies. Other important projects in Belize and Mexico, such as those of Cerros, Lamanai, Cuello, Becan, Xocnaceh, Calakmul and Yalahau, have also widened our knowledge of the Preclassic period. Currently, one of the issues under examination by the San Bartolo Regional Project is the transition from the Late Preclassic period to the Classic period in northeastern Peten.

Previously, scholars distinguished the Classic period from the Preclassic period by the emergence of stone vaulted architecture, monumental inscriptions, polychromed ceramic, a complex ceremonial system and a society structured by classes, traits which have all ever since been discovered in Late Preclassic period contexts (Adams and Culbert 1977; Hammond 1982). The recent excavation of the San Bartolo mural paintings show that Maya writing was already developed in the Lowlands by 100 AD. Therefore, it could be questioned whether there was in fact a transition from the Preclassic period to the Classic period, or if on the contrary, the time periods designated by archaeologists were not sufficiently examined. However, underlying all the chronological problems and the obvious continuities, actual differences and changes took place between the Preclassic and the Classic periods.

The changes that took place were transformations in the political and economical scene of the Maya area. By the end of the Late Preclassic period, the prosperous sites of the Highlands were beginning to collapse (Sharer 1994). The most outstanding of those cities was the trade center of Kaminaljuyu. Possibly, the fall of the sites located in the Highlands derived from the destruction of the exchange network caused by the eruption of the volcano Ilopango in El Salvador (Sheets 1971, 1979). Around that same time, many Late Preclassic period sites in the Lowlands were undergoing depopulation or were being entirely abandoned. On the other hand, the huge site of El Mirador and Nakbe –its predecessor in the north-central area of Peten- were also being abandoned (Hansen 1992). In northwestern Peten, San Bartolo was definitely abandoned by the

end of the Late Preclassic period (Urquiza and Saturno 2002), while many other sites from the Ixcanrio Basin near Río Azul seem to have suffered setbacks around that same time (Adams 1999).

In eastern Peten, the sites of Cival and T'ot, in the Holmul Basin fell, while during the Classic period Holmul emerged as the dominant power in the region (Estrada Belli 2002). The coastal site of Cerros in northern Belize was as well abandoned by the end of the Late Preclassic period, perhaps as a consequence of the fall of El Mirador (Reese-Taylor and Walker 2002). By the end of the Late Preclassic period, many other sites suffered at least a brief interruption or upheavals in their occupational history. Thus, while many traditional "indicators of civilization" had already developed in the Preclassic period within the Maya area, it still seems to be a transition from the Preclassic period to the Classic period, with drastic changes taking place in the political and economical scenes at that time.

Hansen (1992, 1993), has suggested that the collapse of El Mirador and the other centers in north-central Petén had to do with the environmental degradation, which may have led to the decentralization of the distribution network across the Lowlands (Reese-Taylor and Walker 2002). The environmental degradation was an issue in the abandonment of San Bartolo during the Late Preclassic period, based on the diminished thickness of the plaza floors observed (Saturno 2002). Adams (1999) noticed a drastic cut in the Early Classic period rural population near Río Azul, and also mentioned the environmental degradation as one of the problems the Maya had to deal with.

The recent work of Vernon Scarborough, Fred Valdez and Nicholas Dunning (2003a), provides a framework of interpretation for the transition from the Preclassic period to the Classic period in northeastern Petén. The political economy of the Mayas is examined in terms of heterarchy. The political economy describes how the elite groups managed all the resources of the community. One of the major issues to examine is the form society used in the relations of power among groups to organize the use of resources.

A model of social heterarchy is the best way to explain this handling of the resources (Scarborough and Valdez 2003). Heterarchy is defined as "*the set of sophisticated and less foreseeable interdependencies at the heart of and among the members of a group*" (Scarborough *et al.* 2003b). What is important is that not all exchanges follow a vertical direction like in a more hierarchical model, although heterarchy itself is a rather flexible model capable of incorporating several points of view, including the hierarchical interpretations. Scarborough and Valdez (2003) implicitly argue that heterarchy was developed in the Maya area because of the presence of dispersed and fragile resources, as well as the calm rhythm with which landscapes were planned to increase the ability to sustain populational growth in the long run.

These scholars use their research area, the Three Rivers Region, as a micro-cosmos of the entire Central Lowlands, according to the diversity of resources and environments within the territory. Even though this may be a debatable extrapolation, the proximity of the Three Rivers Region to the Xultun-San Bartolo zone makes of it a reasonable area for contrasting archaeological data.

In the region of the Three Rivers, it is argued that centers of varied sizes were politically and economically independent from one another (Scarborough *et al.* 2003b). The bases of the economic organization of the Maya were the so called “resource-specialized communities”, which developed in areas where natural resources were extremely limited. These communities developed as well in zones with a potential for intensive agriculture, while the landscape was organized in communities of “lowlands”, “terraces”, and “watering places”. Notwithstanding the context of the “resource-specialized communities” represents a gradual condition (Scarborough and Valdez 2003), an absolute autonomy for the Maya communities was not an option within the Classic period.

As opposed to the “resource-specialized communities”, other researchers believe that instead, there was a trend towards the generalization of the use of resources, based on the need of achieving some diversity when one lives in such a changeable environment (Dunning *et al.* 2003). Today, in the intersite area of Xultun-San Bartolo, people are trying to apply a model that includes significant aspects of heterarchy, with “resource-specialized communities” (Scarborough and Valdez 2003), together with the more conservative proposition of generalizing the use of resources (Dunning *et al.* 2003).

This model is applied through a systematic program of survey and excavation in the intersite zone of Xultun-San Bartolo, using a high-resolution GPS and a total survey station, complemented with new remote sensing technologies provided by NASA.

San Bartolo is a Late Preclassic period middle size center that occupies 4 km<sup>2</sup>. The ceremonial architecture (with pyramidal temples, a Ballgame, a large plaza and a palace), the carved monuments (stelas and pot-bellied figures), and needless to say, the mural paintings with hieroglyphic inscriptions, are important features of the site that suggest that San Bartolo, during the Late Preclassic period, was part of a complex civilization with the status of polity.

In turn, Xultun has not been fully surveyed, but it is a huge settlement that covers at least 16 km<sup>2</sup>. All features present in San Bartolo, except for the murals, are also found in Xultun but at a much larger scale. The tallest pyramid of the site, Structure A-1 (Von Euw 1978), dominates the Group A Plaza, with a height of 35 m. There are 22 known stelas and an extensive ceramic *corpus* with the emblem glyph of Xultun (Garrison and Stuart 2004). Perhaps Xultun is the largest archaeological site of Peten not yet investigated, undoubtedly affecting our understanding of the politics during the Classic period in this zone.

The area comprised between San Bartolo and Xultun features intermittent lowlands and mountains, with few continuous stretches of higher grounds fit to support a large-scale settlement like San Bartolo, or even less one like Xultun. The larger structures in the intersite area identified so far are located at the site of Chaj K’ek’ Cue, in a peninsula found in the lowlands. The site was discovered during the season of 2003 through satellite imaging, and is now being studied by Robert Griffin (Garrison 2003; Garrison *et al.* 2004). This site seems to include an elite residence, with a height of 8 m.

It is suggested that during the Middle and Late Preclassic periods, a group of interdependent communities developed in the intersite zone of Xultun-San Bartolo and the region of the Ixcanrio basin (Quintana and Wurster 2001). These communities developed in terms of a heterarchical political economy that made emphasis on the cooperation among groups (Scarborough *et al.* 2003b). Some were “communities specialized in particular resources”. One such example is the site of Las Minas, near San Bartolo, discovered in 2003. Las Minas features a disproportionate number of limestone quarries with respect to the number and volume of the site structures, suggesting that limestone blocks were exported, perhaps from somewhere close to Isla Oasis. In this Late Preclassic period context, it is suggested that the lowlands were more humid throughout the year, as opposed to the current situation. This was observed through the identification of “cat-tail cane” pollen (a perennial species in humid lands), in the Preclassic period levels of a lowland near La Milpa, in Belize (Dunning *et al.* 2002, 2003).

As to the model, it is suggested that by the end of the Late Preclassic period the region suffered a long-lasting drought, corroborated by abundant samples retrieved from lakes and other sources of environmental information (Rosenmeier *et al.* 2002; Hodell *et al.* 2001; Gill 2000; Curtis *et al.* 1998, 1996). Further evidence was obtained from isotopic tests accomplished on dog bones from Colha, showing that dogs ate more C4 plants at the end of the Preclassic period, than the C3 plants that once used to constitute their diet (White *et al.* 2001). The C4 plants are more representative of arid environments. This is consistent with the investigations conducted by Dunning and his colleagues (2002), and Hansen (1998), where the lowlands in the intersite area between Xultun and San Bartolo were sealed by the silica erosion that accumulated throughout the extended action of the drought, combined with an extensive deforestation that led to a crisis in the subsistence system of the ancient Maya; all this had repercussions in the heterarchy and the political economy, and caused the emergence of the complex Late Preclassic period structure.

It is believed that all this created a nuclear concentration of settlement patterns around the sites that controlled the resources of the major rivers (for example, Rio Azul), or more specifically, the Xultun area. These sites controlled a significant number of watering places. Two sites located in northeastern Peten are more consistent with the second example; namely, Xultun, and an extended site to the north of Isla Oasis, identified through IKONOS satellite imaging. Xultun has five large known watering places around its immediate adjacent area (Von Ew 1978). Using satellite imaging, several watering places were identified in places located at constant intervals along the east shore of Isla Oasis. Powerful dynasties emerged at sites such as Xultun, as a result of the evident capacity of the rulers to deal with drastic environmental changes. This doesn't mean to imply that sovereignty was built as a result of environmental changes, but rather, that the pre-existing notion of divine sovereignty was reinforced during the Early Classic period by those populations more concentrated in localities restricted by specific environments, such as Xultun.

Dunning and his colleagues (2003:20) suggest that the deposits accumulated as a result of the erosion in the sloping areas surrounding the lowlands, may have produced a fertilized habitat, in spite of the fact that the lowlands themselves had been sealed by silica. When the climate returned to normal after the Preclassic period drought and the Maya developed the adequate technology to take advantage of this fertilized slopes of the lowlands, the Classic period populations began to grow and develop. Then, the political hegemonies that emerged during the Early Classic period had to find a way to deal with those growing elite populations. It is suggested that the large structures found at sites such as Chaj K'ek' Cue were built by the Xultun elites, who controlled the peninsula in order to maintain the political order.

Once again, a heterarchy of interdependent communities had emerged, where each community was dependent on their neighbors for obtaining resources, though in terms of political economy, autonomy was poorer than during the Late Preclassic period peak. The communities had joined some larger center –in this case, Xultun-, through kinship obligations with the political dynasties that emerged in the Early Classic period. In turn, the Late Classic period hegemonies favored deliberate political actions focused on particular elites, rather than autonomous decisions made by the community; one such example could be the foundation of Dos Pilas, following the division of the Tikal dynasty (Martin and Grube 2000).

During the Terminal Classic period the Lowlands underwent a new drought, this time much more severe than the one in the Preclassic period (Rosenmeier *et al.* 2002; Hodell *et al.* 2001; Gill 2000). While many communities collapsed and were abandoned as a result of the drought, other communities that were a part of the interdependency network, succeeded in dealing both with the drought and with the interruption of resource exploitation at the abandoned sites. This process developed from bottom to top, leading eventually to progressive decadence. The result of such an event was a number of communities that reoccupied the abandoned areas that once were large capital cities.

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