

ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL INTERACTION IN THE MAYA PERIPHERY: NEW EVIDENCE FROM PUSILHA, BELIZE

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The focus of the Pusilha Archaeological Project is to investigate the sociopolitical and economic interaction patterns in southeastern Mesoamerica as a political entity, and in addition, to establish the effects of fluctuating connections in the domestic and elite economies. Previous excavations and the investigations of the Pusilha project have revealed a wide corpus of hieroglyphic inscriptions (Braswell *et al.* 2004), as well as data regarding architecture and the planning of the site, which resulted in an inventory of material culture consisting of imported and locally produced goods.

These research goals involve a comprehension of the degree and kind of relationships that existed between Pusilha and other sites in southern Belize. Hopefully, this will make it possible to understand the development of the political entity within a regional context, and to identify the broader directions and trends in the history of the Maya lowlands and of the southeast periphery of Mesoamerica (Figure 1). Emphasis should be made on the fact that the intellectual and material culture of Pusilha aligns the site, to a greater degree with southern Petén, and to a lesser degree with northern and western Petén throughout the Late Classic period and up to the Terminal Classic period.

Previous investigation in sites of the Toledo district accomplished by Richard Leventhal (1990), together with that of Pusilha, led him to define southern Belize as a different region in the Maya lowlands, based, mainly, on three architectural characteristics: Ballgame courts of the closed type, absence of vaulted structures, and extensive use of natural topography in constructions. A fourth major characteristic in the zone of southern Belize is the wrong or eccentric information recorded in hieroglyphic inscriptions regarding lunar events.

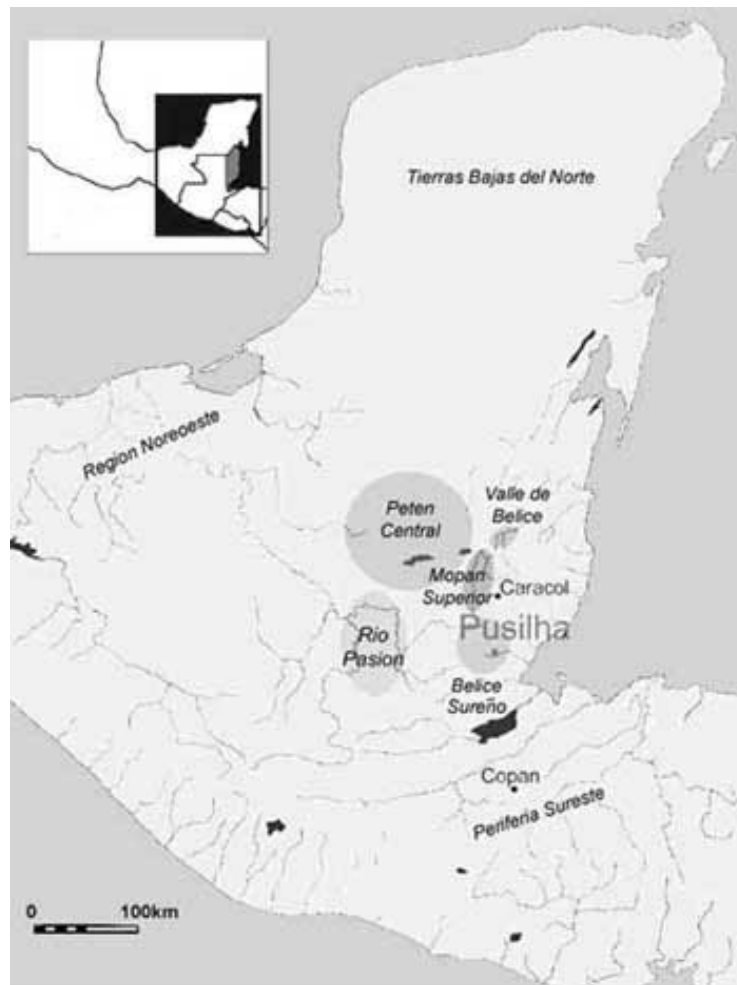


Figure 1. Location of Pusilha, the region of southern Belize, and other regions of the Maya lowlands.

Also, recently discovered sites at San Luis, Petén happen to share these characteristics, suggesting that southern Belize may be expanded to the upper section of the Cancuen River. In other words, the archaeological region examined by Leventhal forms a major connection between the Caribbean and the water divide of the Pasión and Usumacinta rivers. The location of Pusilha in the junction of the Poite and Pusilha rivers placed it in a strategic position to control commerce through this major east and west route that connects the Caribbean with the Central Lowlands.

Pusilha may have served as well as a major center in a north-south trade route that articulated exchange between the lowlands and the southeast periphery of Mesoamerica. The upper Mopan region is located 20 km north of the Pusilha River, therefore, the sites in eastern Petén and western Belize were possibly connected via Pusilha with Quirigua, Copan, and with non-Maya places in Honduras.

The ceramic evidence of the exchange between these two regions –particularly between northern and western Belize and the southeast periphery- has been known for a long time. The “Quetzal Cylinder”, for example, found in a royal tomb at Copan, has been stylistically and chemically attributed to Altun Ha, located in northern Belize (Reents-Budet 1994). The red slipped bowls of the Belize Red type have been found not only in Quirigua but also in sites of the Naco and Ulúa valleys in western

Honduras (Sheptak 1987). Similarly, the “marble” vessels –made of alabaster, actually- from the Ulúa Valley have been recovered in several sites of the Maya lowlands, such as Uxactun, Altun Ha and San José, Belize (Sheptak 1987). Thus, there was an active exchange between the Eastern Lowlands and non-Maya regions of Honduras during the Late Classic period.

The intermediate location of Pusilha suggests that this important political unit may have connected the eastern lowlands with western Honduras and other parts of the Mesoamerican southeastern periphery. Today, we are attempting to achieve a greater understanding of the role played by Pusilha and southern Belize in this interaction; therefore, the chronology and the effects of this exchange on politics and local economy are being examined.

Even though only two seasons of excavations and a third survey season were conducted at Pusilha, several patterns providing answers to these questions have begun to appear.

2004 FIELD SEASON

During the first two field seasons in Pusilha, significant portions of the site were surveyed, including the Gateway Hill Acropolis, the Moho Plaza with its hieroglyphic stairway, the Plaza of the Stelae Group, Ballgame 1, and several settlement zones (Figure 2). In 2002, a test unit, excavation and consolidation program was conducted at a structure destroyed by heavy machinery.

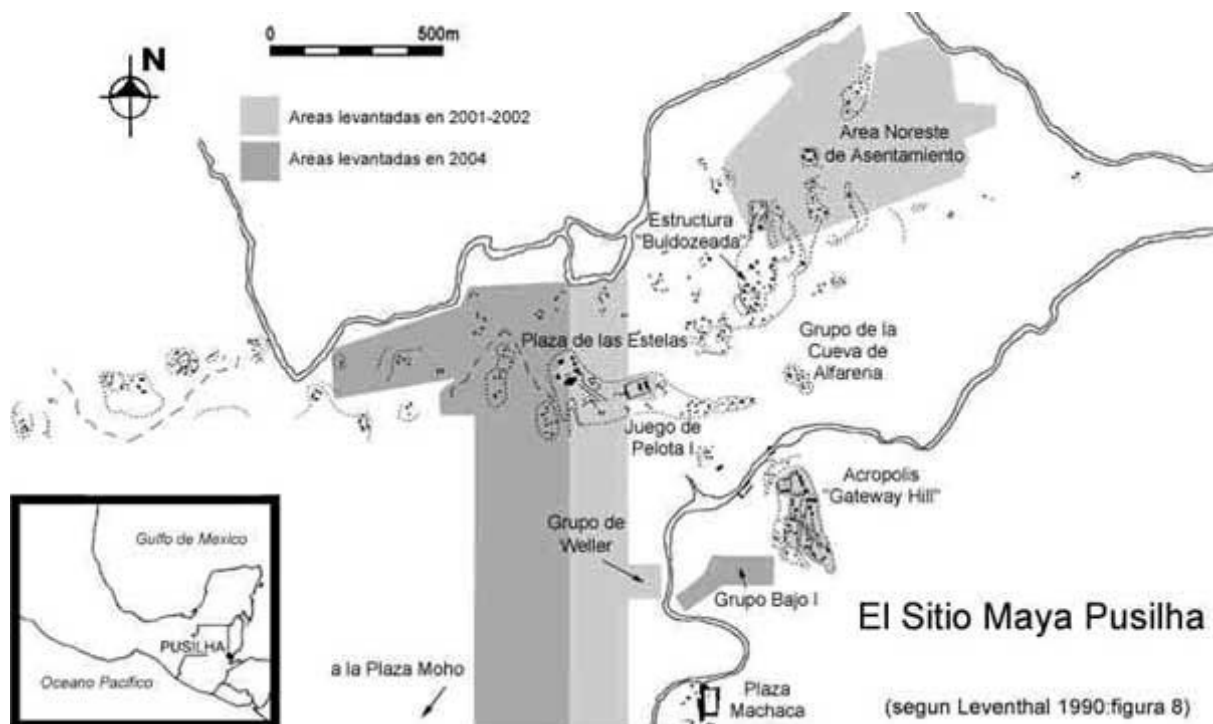


Figure 2. The Maya site of Pusilha (after Leventhal 1990: Figure 8).

Christian Prager, project co-director, analyzed the wide hieroglyphic *corpus* of Pusilha and rebuilt much of the site’s dynastic history (Braswell *et al.* 2004; Prager

2002). To this day, 11 rulers of Pusilha have been identified, as well as other ten related individuals (Figure 3); other 17 persons not chronologically established in the history of Pusilha have also been documented. At least eight warfare incidents have been annotated. The other site in Belize with a known history and a wealth comparable to that of Pusilha, is Caracol. The amount and complexity of the texts from Pusilha are two of the traits that link the region of southern Belize in a higher degree with central Petén than with the rest of Belize.







Gobernante	Estelas	Nacimiento	Ascención/Reino	Muerte
A 	O, Q	9.4.0.0.1-9.4.19.17.19	9.6.17.8.18?	9.8.0.0.1-9.10.14.17.19
B 	P, D	9.7.4.9.12? 9.8.15.0.1-9.9.14.17.19	9.8.15.0.1-9.9.14.17.19	9.10.15.0.1-9.11.0.0.0
C 	H	9.7.12.6.7	9.11.0.0.0	9.11.0.0.1-9.12.0.0.0
D 	K		9.11.0.0.1-9.12.0.0.0	9.12.0.0.1-9.14.0.0.0
E 	M		9.12.0.0.1-9.14.0.0.0	9.14.0.0.1-9.15.0.0.0
F 	-		9.14.0.0.1-9.14.19.17.19	
G 	E		9.14.0.0.1-9.15.0.0.0	

Figure 3. Some rulers from Pusilha (by Christian Prager).

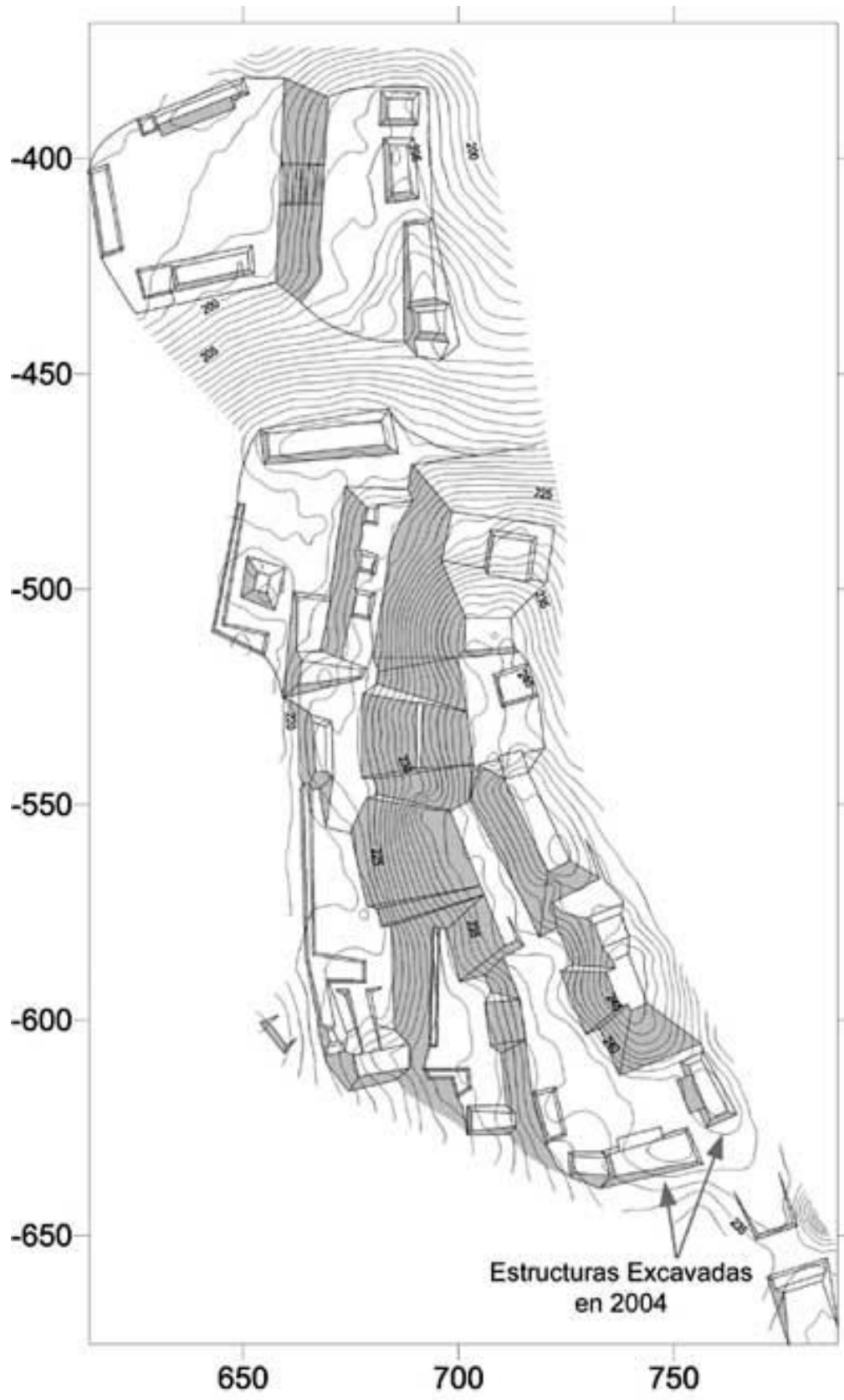


Figure 4. Gateway Hill Acropolis, Puzosilha, showing two structures excavated in 2004.

Structures excavated in 2004

In 2004, survey continued within a 1 km² area. Also, two structures with chambers, situated south of the Gateway Hill Acropolis were excavated (Figure 4), as well as three additional structures of a large group, 150 m at west and 55 m below the Acropolis. During the course of the investigations, nine burials were excavated, dated between the VII and IX centuries AD. The objects that accompany the burials inside the crypts, dating to the second half of the Late Classic period, consist at least of one complete pyrite mirror, hematite spangles, four polychromed vessels, shell ornaments and two enigmatic artifacts that include one slate trowel (Figure 5a and b).

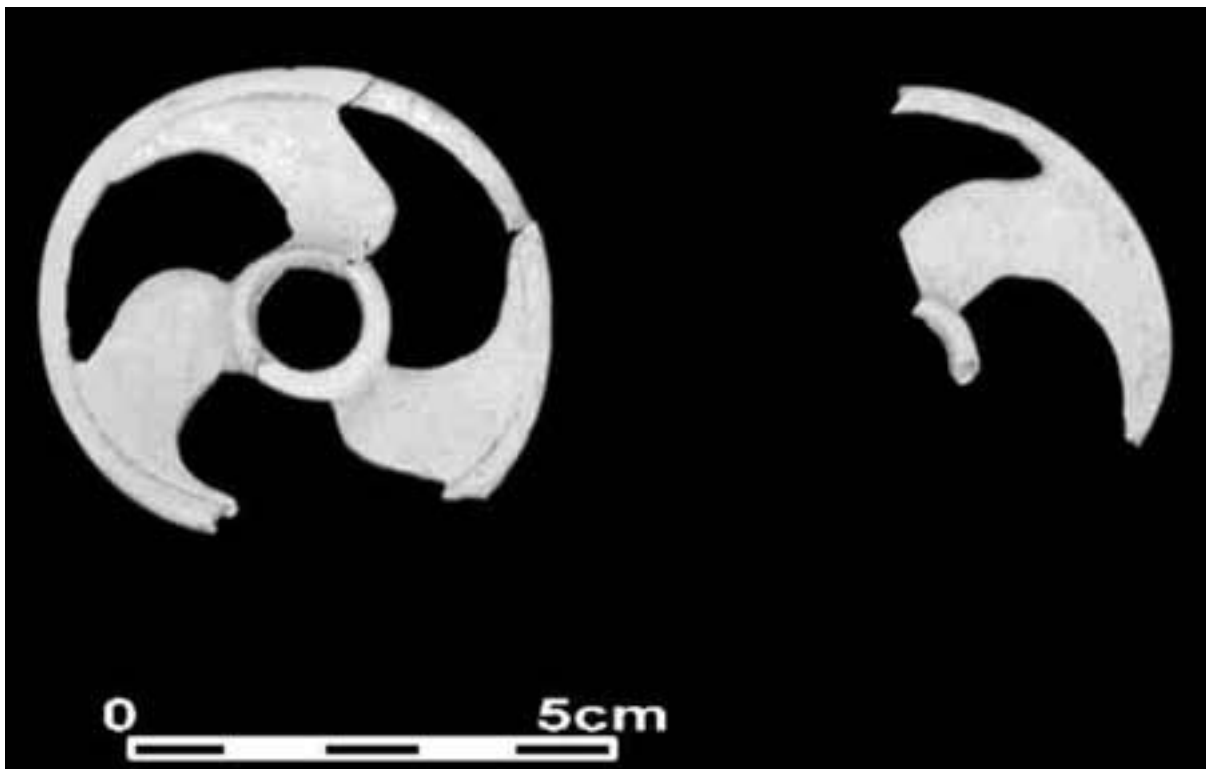


Figure 5a. Artifacts recovered in Burial 7, an elaborate crypt found in a structure 150 m west of Gateway Hill Acropolis: (a) shell ornaments.

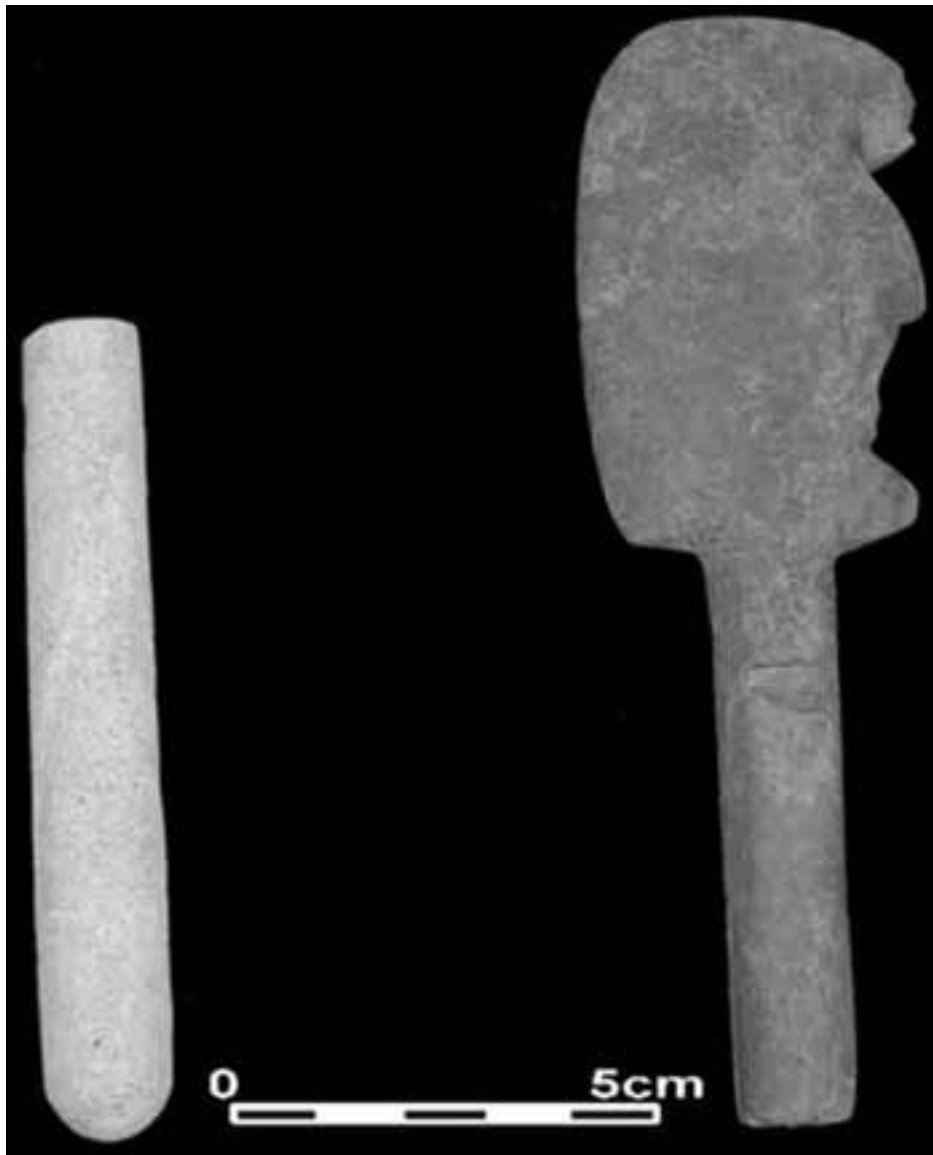


Figure 5b. Artifacts recovered in Burial 7, an elaborate crypt found in a structure 150 m west of Gateway Hill Acropolis: (b) a slate trowel and a limestone baton.

The bone collection from the crypt suggests it was a secondary burial. The analysis of these artifacts altogether, as well as of the abundant complete and partial vessels, lithic tools, shell ornaments, human remains and abundant figurines recovered in other contexts, is already underway.

CERAMIC ANALYSIS

The inscriptions at Pusilha suggest that the site was occupied at the end of the Early Classic period; the earliest historic inscription of the site refers to events occurred in AD 570. The ceramic recovered in previous explorations in the caves of the area includes Early Classic markers, such as polychrome bowls with basal flanges, and vessels in the shape of shoes or calceiforms, dated to even earlier stages. Nevertheless, the ceramic material recovered in architectural contexts at Pusilha was dated to the Late Classic, Terminal Classic and Postclassic periods. The

following discussion on the ceramics from Pusilha is restricted to the Late Classic period, from AD 600 to 800, approximately.

The Late Classic collection from Pusilha includes common features across the Central Lowlands. Such features include:

- Striated, unslipped jars, some of which feature an appliqué decoration (Figure 6).

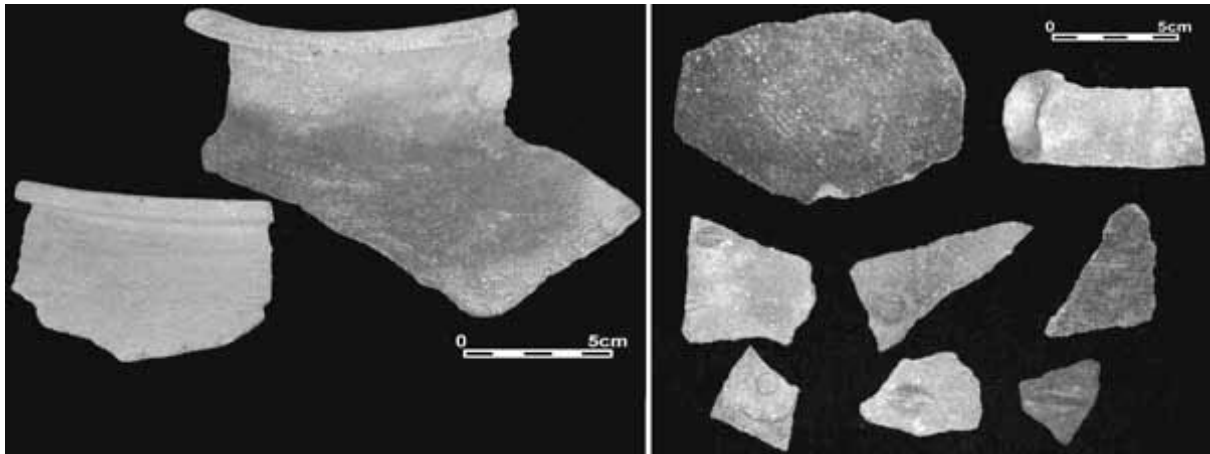


Figure 6. Striated jars, Pusilha.

- Modeled censers with appliqué features.
- Plain or decorated vessels of the Black Polished ware (Figure 7).

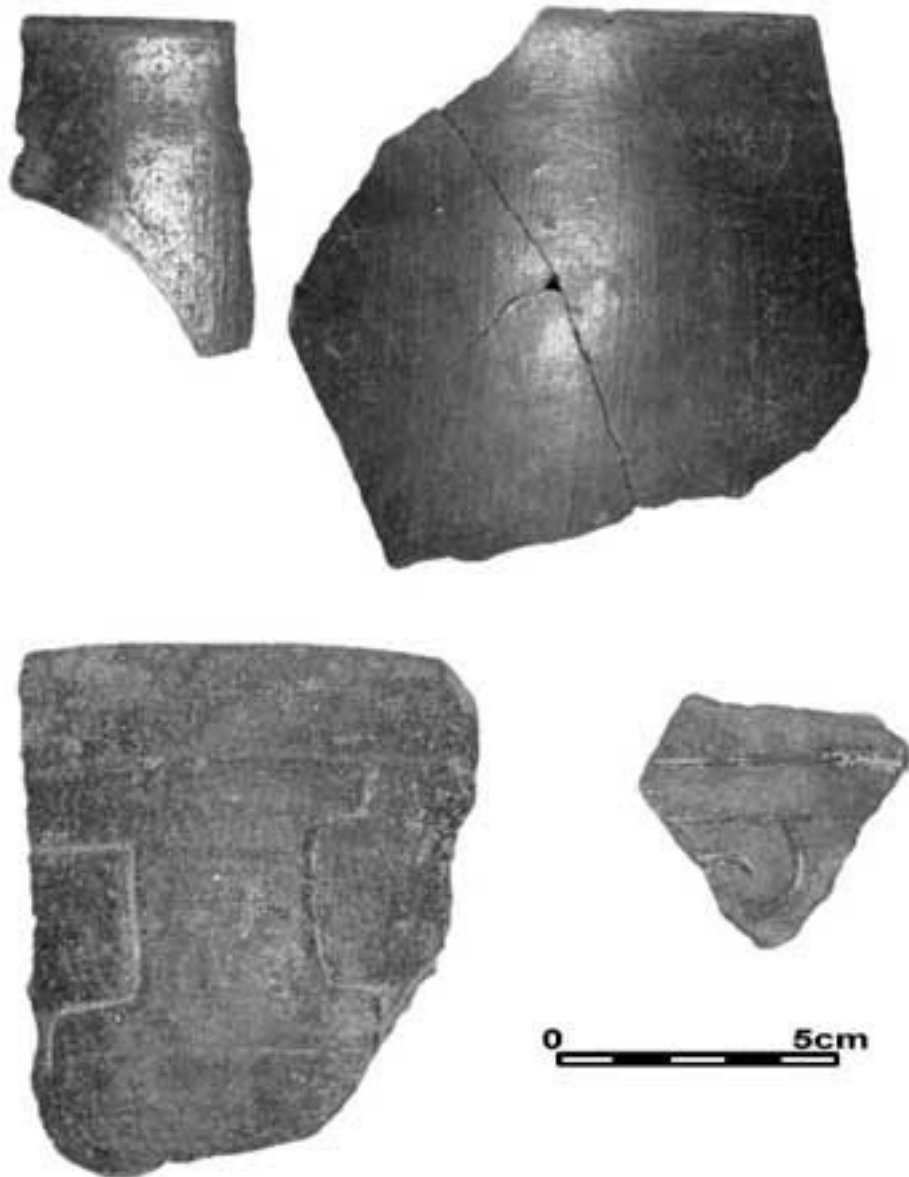


Figure 7. Ceramic corresponding to the Black Polished ware, Pusiha.

- A wide variety of polychromatic vessels with orange or cream slip, occurring in different shapes such as bowls, cylinders and dishes (Figure 8).



Figure 8. Polychromatic ceramic with orange slip and cream slip, Pusilha.

- There are also bowls and large jars with red slip, some of which feature impressed designs in the upper zone of the body (Figure 9).

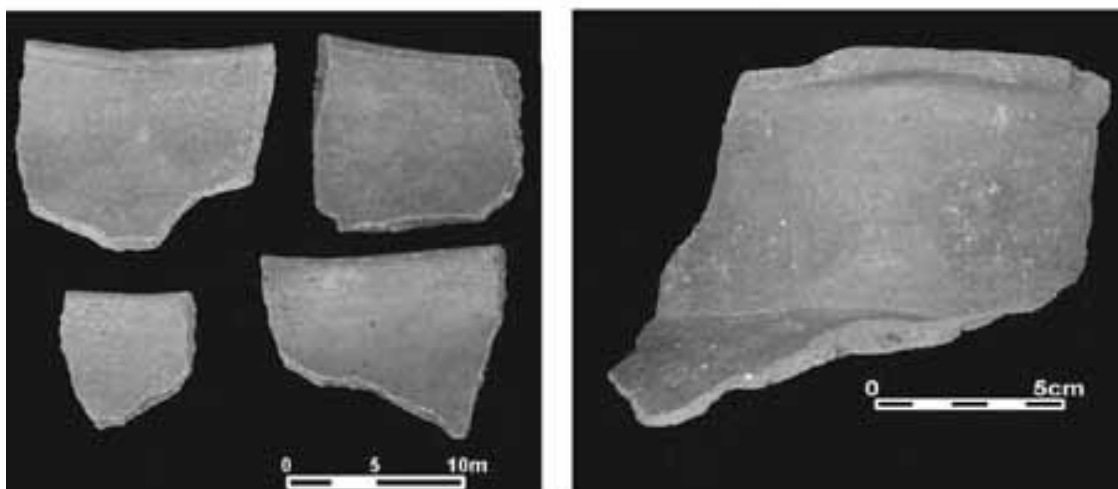
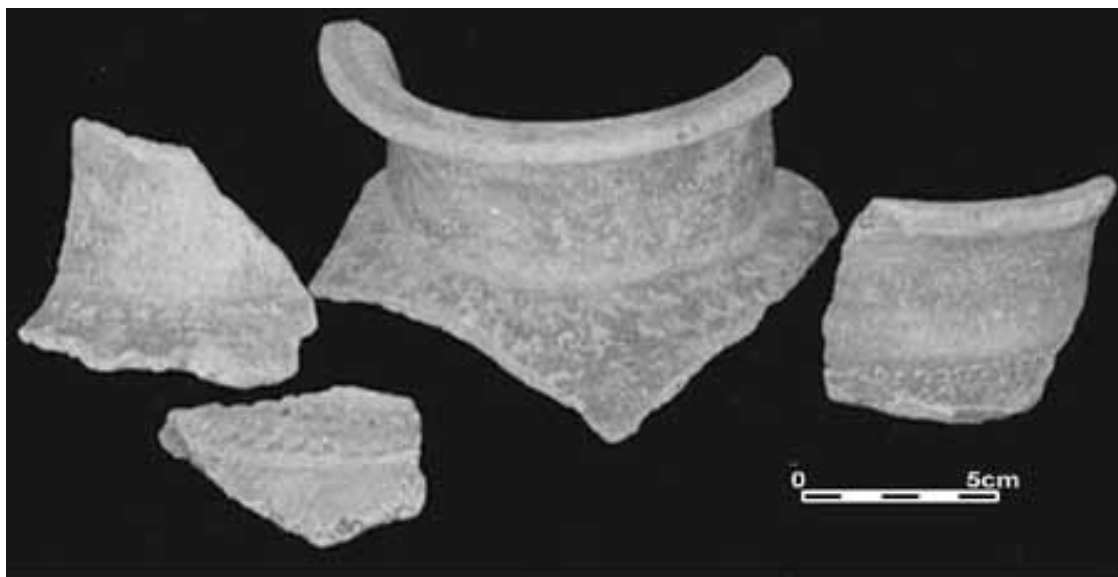


Figure 9. Bowls and jars with red slip, Pusilha.

These same general categories of vessels are prominent in the ceramic collection of Lubaantun, although specific forms differ greatly between the two sites of the southern Belize region (Hammond 1975). This pattern may reflect separate sub-regional systems for the pottery of each site, and temporal differences in their occupational periods. Nonetheless, it is clear that the ceramics from Pusilha and Lubaantun have many characteristics in common, including the presence of jars of the Puluacax Unslipped type, with short necks and coarse pastes (Figure 10). This type occurs in southern Belize only; an additional similarity is the abundance of Late Classic figurines found in both sites, although this is also a shared pattern with the region of the upper Río Pasión, specifically, with the site of Cancuen.

More significant is the pattern of interregional affiliation reflected in the collections of these two sites. In terms of type and modal frequencies, the Late Classic collection of southern Belize has more in common with the ceramic collections of the Pasión River region, and –to a certain extent- with northern Petén, than with the Belize River Basin. This very strong relationship with sites of the Central Lowlands is surprising, given the convenience of east-west river transportation and the difficult topography of the Maya Mountains.

The characteristics of the collection from southern Belize, shared with regions to west, include jars with red slip and impressed and stamped designs. Those jars are common in the Pasión River, in the region of Dolores and in northern Petén. These vessels are rare or absent in the collections of the Belize River Basin, although they occur in sites located on the north side of the Maya Mountains, including several caves in the region of the Chiquibul River (Hammond 1975: 305), and in Caracol (Chase 1994:174).

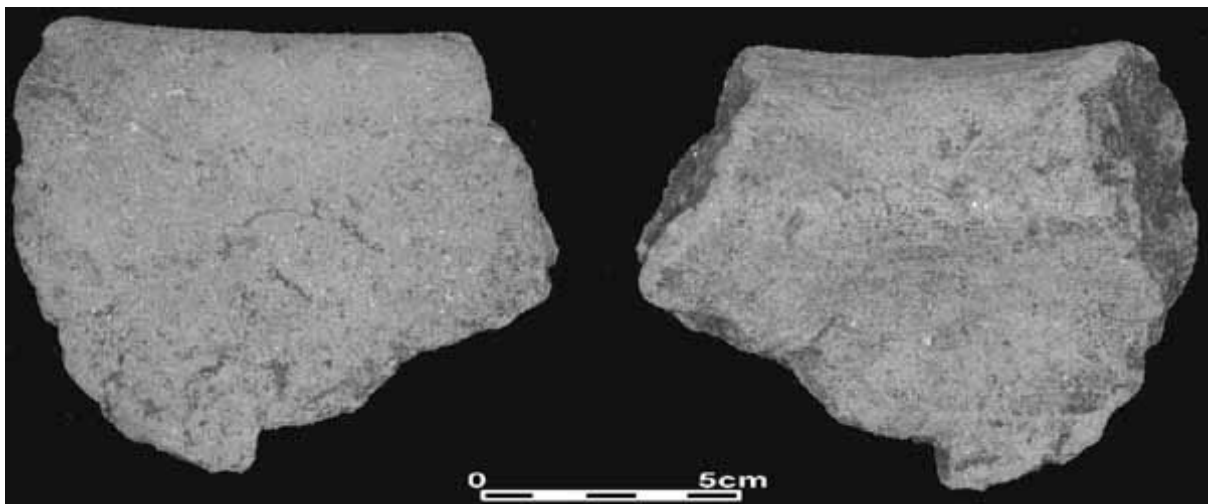


Figure 10. Jars of the Puluacax Unslipped type, Pusilha.

In addition to these extensively shared types and modes, certain components of the Pusilha collection feature a more circumscribed distribution. Among such elements are the griddles, common in Pusilha and in the upper section of the Pasión River, as well as in the region of Dolores (Figure 11; Bill 2001; Laporte 1995a, b). Even though these *comales* are not present in Lubaantun, they formed a class that was typical of the utilitarian traditions of the southeastern lowlands region.

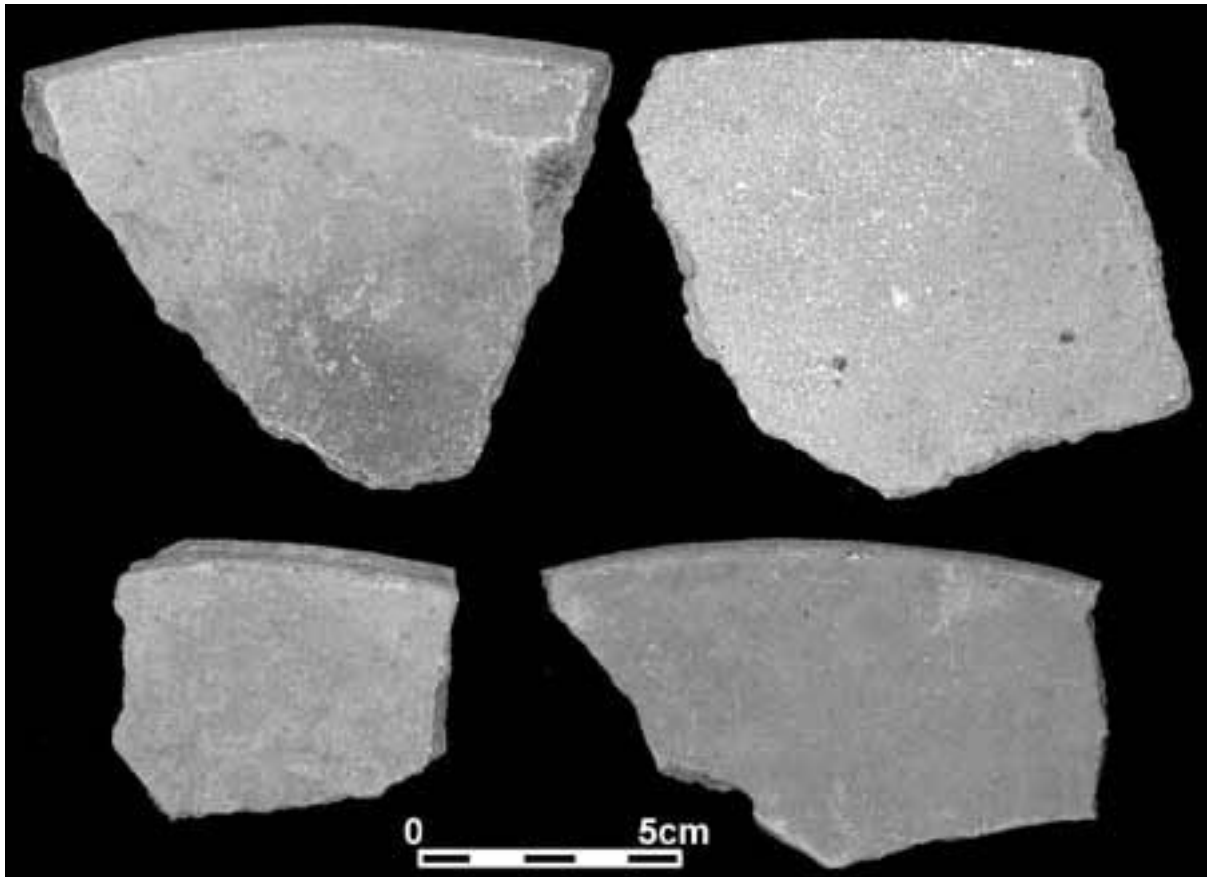


Figure 11. Griddles, Pusilha.

Also expressed in the polychromatic bowls from Pusilha, there are certain design elements that are extremely rare in other parts of the Maya lowlands, but on the contrary, are quite common in several polychromatic traditions from the southeast periphery of Mesoamerica. They include the “twist-and-bud” motif, composed of curved lines with small oval features (Figure 12). This common feature of design in Pusilha occurs as well in certain polychromes from eastern El Salvador and other places in the southeastern periphery (Andrews 1976). Other common motifs from Pusilha include small birds and sitting monkeys. Small birds are a frequent decorative feature in hand-painted vessels from western Honduras and other places from the southeast periphery. Sitting monkeys occur as well in incised vessels from Pusilha and from other parts of the lowlands, including the region of the Pasión River, and are also a common motif in the polychromed vessels of Altun Ha, in the north of Belize.

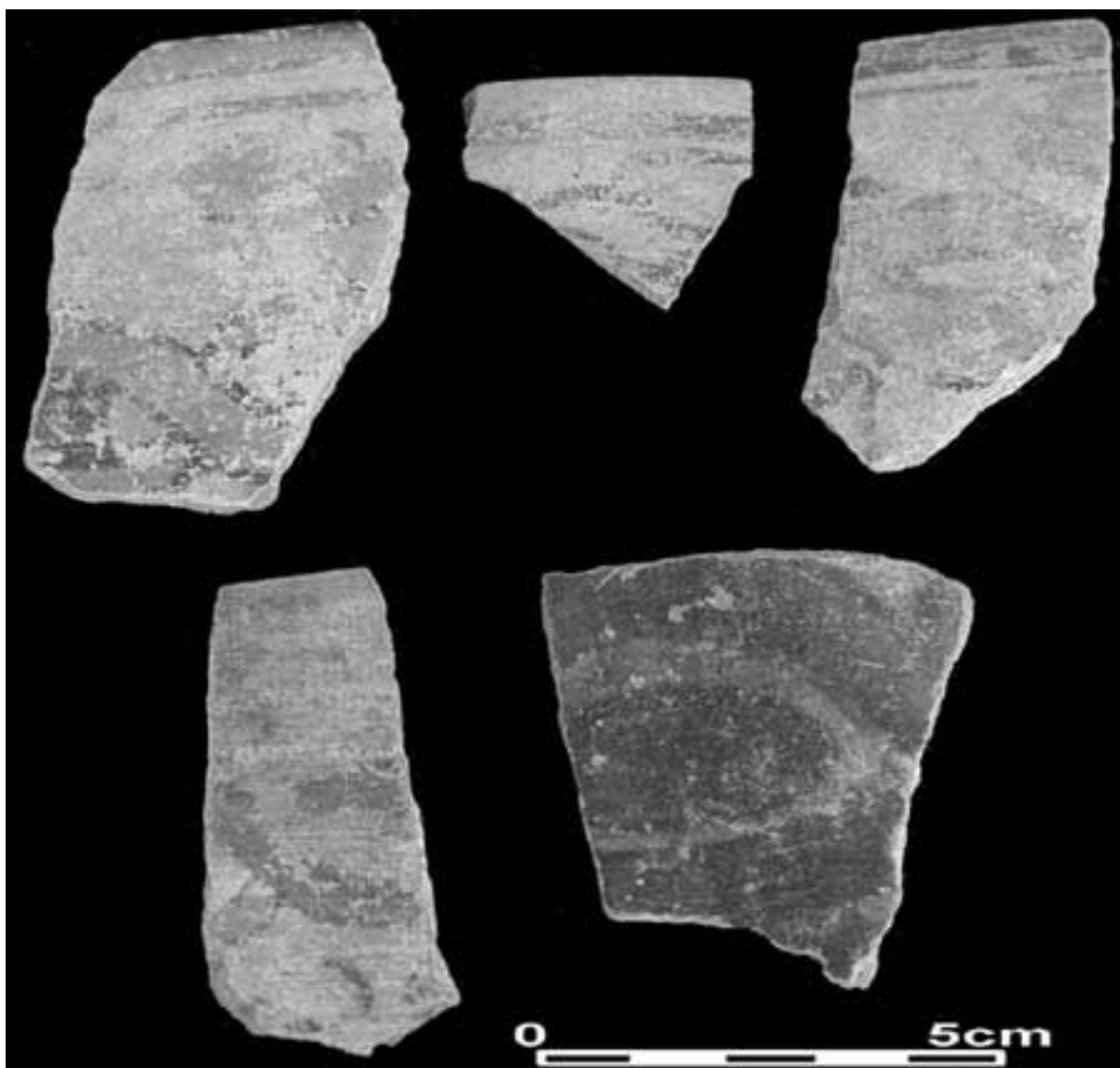


Figure 12. Polychromatic sherds with the twist-and-bud motif, Pusilha.

Although polychromed vessels with these motifs were not reported for Lubaantun, it is significant that some of these same features –monkeys and birds included- are typical of the stamped designs in the red-slipped jars of that nearby site. Besides, these motifs do not occur in the stamped jars from elsewhere in the Maya lowlands.

To date, no samples of Copador Polychrome have been recovered, a type distinctive and characteristic of Late Classic Copan and of the west of El Salvador, and which occurs as an extremely rare importation outside those zones. Nevertheless, chemical analysis of sherds of the Copador type presumably collected in Pusilha by the British Museum's Expedition to Belize in the past century revealed that half of the sherds had been manufactured in the region of Copan (Bishop and Beaudry 1994; Bishop *et al.* 1986; Joyce 1929; Hammond 1975).

CONCLUSIONS

The ceramic inventory of Pusilha, including elite vessels and utilitarian types, corroborates that significant contacts existed with several regions in and out of the Maya area. Additional work is needed to clarify the Late Classic collection of Pusilha, and to identify with a greater certainty the chronological differences between the types and modal frequencies associated with earlier and subsequent phases of the Late Classic period. However, correlations between data from different ceramic assemblages are already available, which suggest regional and interregional affiliation patterns for Pusilha during the Late Classic period.

The work carried out in 2002 by Christian Prager on the hieroglyphic inscriptions of Pusilha, shows connections with several regions, including the zones of Petexbatún and the Pasión River, as well as more ambiguous connections with Copan and Quirigua and with the southeast periphery of the Maya area (Braswell *et al.* 2004). Contacts in these same regions are evident by certain characteristics of the Late Classic ceramic collection of Pusilha, as well as by the iconography and material culture of other centers from southern Belize.

However, there is evidence suggesting that the external affiliations of Pusilha may have changed during the Classic period. The types related with the area of the Pasión River occur throughout the VII and VIII centuries, but it should be noted that the samples of Copador wares of the Pottery Cave correspond to a relatively early context in the site occupation. At the same time –during the mid-VII century–, iconographic conventions and two names present in the hieroglyphic texts suggest that Pusilha had important connections with Copan. It is also of interest to note that the tomb in Copan that contains the so-called Quetzal Cylinder, imported from Altun Ha, dated to that time frame (Bill 1997).

By the mid-VIII century, new connections were established with other regions. This period may be described as a time characterized by a broader economic and political independence, as well as by more significant affiliations with other centers at the south of Belize. The more direct connections, for instance, with the Lubaantun ceramics, took place by the end of the Late Classic period. The distinctive type Puluacax Unslipped, with a deeper history at Lubaantun, appeared fully restricted to the superficial contexts of Pusilha.

The sole direct connection with the ceramics of the Belize River basin is the imported ceramic type known as Belize Red. This type appeared only at the end of the Classic occupation of the site, tentatively dated between AD 790 and 830. Except for a complete vessel recovered in a late burial, the Belize Red sherds were exclusively found in the superficial contexts of Pusilha. Hammond's analysis (1975) points to a similar late frequency for the Belize Red type in Lubaantun. Thus, during the last decades of the Classic, the region of southern Belize was connected, for the first time, with the Belize River basin.

The data on obsidian supplies point as well to a reorganization of interregional connections around the end of the Classic period. During the VII and VIII centuries, virtually all of the obsidian consumed at the site came from the source of El Chayal, Guatemala, a pattern which Pusilha shares with most of the sites from the Maya

lowlands. During the IX century, however, more obsidian from Ixtepeque arrived to the site, as well as material from Pachuca, Hidalgo and from Zaragoza, Puebla.

When the sites of the Central Lowlands underwent their demographic decay, the remaining populations broadened their economic networks, changed their trading links and obtained obsidian from new sources. Braswell, among others, has noted a similar pattern for Xunantunich in the Belize River basin and even farther west in the region of the Petén lakes, particularly during the IX century. Mexican obsidian first appeared in Pusilha during the Terminal Classic, as also the Fine Orange ceramic from the northwest Maya area. Both the material from Pachuca and the obsidian from Zaragoza began to enter that region in large amounts by the end of the Late Classic period, and maybe for that reason the Fine Orange ceramic and the Mexican obsidian were brought to Pusilha from the Gulf Coast.

Thus, although the analysis of the data obtained at Pusilha has just been initiated, some significant connections with certain regions during specific periods of time have been observed. Additional investigation of these links will increase with respect to the trade connections within and beyond the Maya lowlands during the Late Classic and Terminal Classic periods. The studies on ceramics and other artifacts from Pusilha have focused on ascertaining the nature and chronology of these regional and interregional connections with the zone of the Pasión River, the southeast periphery, and finally, with the Belize River basin. The main objective consists in evaluating the roles played by these zones in the trajectory of the development of the site itself, and examining the effects of sociopolitical change in the interaction networks of the Maya area.

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