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Postclassic Political and Economic Development in the Chetumal Province: Establishing a Chronological Framework



Research Year: 1999

Culture: Maya

Chronology: Post Classic

Location: Chetumal Province, Belize

Sites: Laguna de On Island, Caye Coco, Last Resort

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Introduction

The Belize Postclassic Project is investigating the dynamics of political development in the Chetumal Province region from 1000-1500 A.D. (Masson and Rosenswig, 1997; 1998; 1999; Rosenswig and Masson, 2000). Three seasons of research (1991, 1996-1997) focused on the small village site of Laguna de On Island, and since 1997, we have worked on neighboring settlements including an island monumental center at

Progreso Lagoon (Caye Coco) and a village site at Laguna Seca (Last Resort). Research at these sites provides a regional perspective on the dynamic trends of political and economic development that are currently unknown for this province. The past two seasons (1998-1999) have focused intensively on community patterns at Caye Coco and have revealed the following information: (1) most of the monumental structures are elite residences that were erected in a single episode after A.D. 1250; (2) a probable meeting hall occupies the center of the site in a neighborhood of multiple elite residences; and (3) off-mound deposits at Caye Coco are rich with domestic features, including buried residential platforms, courtyards, and cemeteries. In particular, one deeply stratified elite midden has yielded artifact samples of a quantity, quality of preservation, and diversity (accompanied by faunal bone suitable for AMS dating) that provide a unique opportunity for refining the Postclassic chronology of our lagoon sites in the Chetumal Province. Through the study of diachronic patterns of household assemblages at this site, we are assessing the development of social status variation and patterns of production and exchange at this settlement.

This analysis is performed with the goal of re-examining the mercantile model proposed by William L. Rathje and Jeremy Sabloff to characterize Late Postclassic Maya social transformations (Rathje, 1975; Sabloff and Rathje, 1975) from the perspective of household economics. The rise of mercantilism during this period, facilitated through enhanced circum-Yucatecan maritime trade, correlates with significant changes in the distribution and expression of social power in Maya society. Elites and entrepreneurs seized and created new opportunities for prosperity and autonomy in this expanding network of economic interaction.

Our work in northern Belize suggests that Postclassic society in this region was stable and prosperous over a long period of time (A.D. 1000-1500), and economic and political interaction intensified during the latter half of this period (Masson, In Press). As regional analysis of Postclassic social development has been impaired by the need for a solid ceramic sequence supported by AMS dating, FAMSI underwrote the establishment of a chronology at the site of Caye Coco which will aid in the chronological assessment of other sites in northern Belize examined by this project. This chronology will facilitate a fine-grained assessment of economic development within these communities.

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For related information see the report submitted to FAMSI by Marilyn Masson: [Surviving Postclassic Maya Collapse—Belize](#)

Results

Shared basic similarities in Postclassic Maya ceramic slip and paste characteristics make it difficult to assign ceramic sherds to particular centuries from A.D. 1000-1500. While these similarities do attest to long term continuity and stability within this region, they are based on general observations made in the type:variety system (slip color and texture, paste composition, and vessel form). Our current chronological work focuses on attribute analysis that will make it possible to seriate assemblages of even the most fragmented sherds from shallow deposits and place them into narrower temporal parameters. Our ability to assess economic and political dynamics thus hinges on the degree to which we can refine our Postclassic chronology.

Seven AMS samples have been submitted from Caye Coco to Thomas Stafford of Stafford Research Laboratories, Inc., in Boulder, Colorado. Six of these samples are from Levels 1-6 of a deep, rich Postclassic midden that provides rare stratigraphic separation of deposits in which ceramic ware changes are readily observable from top to bottom ([Figure 1](#), [Figure 2](#), [Figure 3](#) and [Figure 4](#)). The AMS results received thus far (six of seven samples) are summarized in the table below.

<p align="center">Table 1 AMS dates from Caye Coco (by Stafford Research Laboratories, Inc.) (CAMS number is assigned by the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory's Center for Accelerator Mass Spectrometry)</p>		
Context	Results	Calibrated Age
Subop 18 midden Level 1 CAMS 64544 - faunal bone	670+/-50BP	A.D. 1260-1410 (95.4% confidence)
Subop 18 midden Level 2 CAMS 64541 - faunal bone	700+/-40BP	A.D. 1240-1400 (95.4% confidence)
Subop 18 midden Level 3	not yet processed	
Subop 18 midden Level 4 CAMS 63094 - faunal bone	770+/-40BP	A.D. 1190-1300 (95.4% confidence)
Subop 18 midden Level 5 CAMS 64542 - faunal bone	1900+/-70BP <i>**** the piece of faunal bone dated here is inferred to be older than the associated artifacts</i>	50 B.C. - 260 A.D. (93.6% confidence)
Subop 18 midden Level 6 CAMS 64543 - faunal bone	1160+/-50BP	A.D. 770-990 (93.3% confidence)
Subop 29 - fire pit feature CAMS	1070+/-50BP	A.D. 860-1040

These dates were surprising. Levels 5 and 6 are much older than we anticipated. The date in [Table 1](#) for Level 5 is not considered valid, and both levels were more likely deposited around the temporal interval implied by CAMS 64543 in Level 6, A.D. 770-900. These levels exhibit much greater diversity of slipped and unslipped ceramic types, and the ceramics in these levels resemble each other more than ceramics in Levels 1-4. The unslipped wares in Levels 5-6 include a variety of sandy pastes that are not seen in most Postclassic lots at the site, and the slipped wares are sometimes made of a buff sandy paste (with eroded slip, not unlike those that Deborah Walker has identified as Zakpah Orange Red in her 1990 Cerros dissertation) or they are of a buff, calcite-tempered paste with a slateware-like texture. These fine paste "slate" wares have forms and incising that suggest stylistic emulation of wares that are common to the contemporary northern site of Chichén Itzá. If Bey et al. (1997) are correct in proposing that Chichén Itzá was at the height of its power from A.D. 800-1000, then these lower level slate-like ceramics at Caye Coco are contemporary with this development and may reflect interaction with the northern lowlands at this time. Some forms of slipped wares in Levels 5-6 anticipate those observed for later Payil Red ceramics that predominate in the upper levels of this midden at Caye Coco, but they exhibit a different paste composition. Later Payil wares are clearly calcite-tempered.

A large fire pit (Subop 29) provided a date that is close in time to Levels 5 and 6. The pit was found near the north base of Structure 6, and was detected at a depth of 1m below the surface. Two kinds of ceramics were recovered in this pit, which was almost 2 meters wide and a meter deep. Large sherds of Tsbak Unslipped (red sandy paste) and Zakpah Orange Red Slipped (buff sandy paste with incomplete firing) were abundant in the pit. The function of the pit is not known, though numerous burned *Pomacea* shell and several charred logs were present within it, along with abundant quantities of large Tsbak and Zakpah sherds. These wares precede the development of Payil Red, although overlap in form and decoration is observed between Payil and Zakpah in earlier Postclassic levels. Tsbak persists in small quantities throughout later midden levels that are dominated by Payil Red and Santa Unslipped.

Level 4 represents a transitional level where Payil Red slips and forms emerge, though footed vessels are primarily the "grater bowl" oven-footed form. Level 4 dates to the 12th century (A.D. 1190-1300), and is thus substantially later than Level 6 (and presumably Level 5). Some slate-like characteristics persist on some sherds of Levels 3 and 4, though Payil Red is clearly recognized in these levels. Santa Unslipped, a calcite-to-grit tempered ware that dominates Postclassic assemblages of Laguna de On and Caye Coco also becomes common in Level 4 in contrast to earlier sandy paste unslipped wares of Levels 5 and 6. Payil Red and Santa Unslipped dominate Levels 1-3 of the deposit. Vented hollow feet, a well-known diagnostic of Payil wares, appear in Level 3 of this midden. The date for Level 3 has not yet been processed, and Levels 1-2 date from the late 13th to early 15th centuries. While Payil and Santa pastes appear quite standardized in these levels, more diversity in the varieties of forms is observed.

This report will be updated when the remaining AMS dates are received. We still await two dates - one from Level 3 of the midden and one from a Colonial site at Laguna Seca

(Last Resort). Currently, Masson and Rosenswig are working on an article for publication that will document ceramic attribute and type variation over time within the midden based on the results of this chronological analysis. This website will be updated early in the Fall of 2000 with information on ceramic attribute variation.

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Figure 1. Slipped ceramics from Level 6, Caye Coco midden (Subop 18/18a).



Figure 2. Slipped ceramics from Level 5, Caye Coco midden (Subop 18/18a).



Figure 3. Slipped ceramics from Level 4, Caye Coco midden (Subop 18/18a).



Figure 4. Slipped ceramics from Level 3, Caye Coco midden (Subop 18/18a).



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Figure 7. Map of northern Belize showing location of Caye Coco.

Terminal Classic and Postclassic Settlement at Progresso Lagoon



Figure 8. Map of Progresso Lagoon.



Figure 9. Payil Red vessel from a burial at Caye Coco.

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