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Ancient Maya Commerce and the New River Conurbation

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In this chapter, I consider commercialism as a stimulus to the development of ancient Maya cities. I shift focus from production and prestige economy, which have been the subject of much archaeological research and theorizing, to consumption by ordinary households, which is less often discussed. I do not propose consumerism as a prime mover for the rise of cities, nor do I visualize ancient Maya traders as canoe-borne capitalists. I do propose that consumer culture is not exclusively a product of modern capitalism, though some researchers disagree (Campbell 1987; McCracken 1988), and that certain archaeological patterns suggest that a healthy trade in commodities contributed to Maya urbanism.

Urban Maya

Although mounds left behind by Maya houses are evenly distributed over Maya settlements, this even spread rarely represents the configuration of any single period but is accumulated from the construction (and destruction) of houses occupied and abandoned throughout the life of a city. When careful chronology is applied to house remains including those not represented by mounds, some sites show a more uneven distribution and an increased nucleation of houses (and probably population) over time (Pyburn et al. 1998). Because households are not corporate groups, but economic units that vary in composition and residence pattern across both time and space (Netting

1993; Wilk 1988), house remains do not directly reflect functioning households, which makes archaeological reconstructions of changes in ancient Maya population density extremely speculative. Because most early urban centers in other parts of the world were not as densely populated as archaeologists once thought (Hansen 2000a, 2000b; Sjoberg 1960; M E. Smith 2004; M. L. Smith 2003c; Trigger 2003; Yoffee 2005), calculations of absolute density command less attention.

Abundant data, particularly on site-size hierarchies and multifunctionality, have demonstrated that Maya cities, towns, and villages were linked economically and through a range of sociopolitical and cultural ties. The weight of Polanyi's "dogmatic misconceptions" (Trigger 2003:59) has been lifted, and archaeologists no longer automatically accept that in pre-capitalist cities the economy was subsumed by the political structure, that reciprocity and redistribution are on the primitive side of an impenetrable barrier that divides pre-capitalism from capitalism, or that non-capitalist economies are fundamentally different (Masson 2002a; M. E. Smith 2004; M. L. Smith 1999; Trigger 2003; Wilk 1996; Yoffee 2005). A spate of new work revisiting the familiar idea that ancient Maya cities were linked through commercial systems (Rathje 1971, 1975; Renfrew 1975; Sabloff 1975; Sabloff and Freidel 1975; Sabloff and Lamberg-Karlovsky 1975; Sabloff and Rathje 1975) has again opened up new and better ways of understanding archaeological data (Marcus 1995b, 2003a; Masson and Freidel 2002; Rathje 2002; Sabloff 2004, 2007).

Tracing the interrelations among states by documenting the volume and flow of various commodities has led us away from the expectation that early states were invariably territorial (Charlton and Nichols 1997; Trigger 2003) or macro-states (Hansen 2000a) that subsumed multiple urban centers in an integrated political economy. Hansen's concept of "city-state culture" (2000a:16), composed of multiple self-governing but not self-sufficient cities that are economically specialized but still primarily agrarian, has gained footing (M. E. Smith 2004; M. L. Smith 2003c; Trigger 2003; Yoffee 2005) as cross-culturally valid and testable.

The city-state culture model, echoing theories of peer-polity interaction (Renfrew and Cherry 1986; Sabloff 1986), renews the focus on the role of interdependent commercialism among similar communities in the rise of cities (Flannery 1968; Rathje 1972, 1975; Sabloff 1977; Sabloff and Rathje 1975). Archaeologists often characterize the Maya economy as lacking full-time commercial specialists except those who were "attached" to elite patrons (Freidel and Schele 1984; Webster 2001; Yaeger 2003). Along with the red herring of absolute population density, this presumed lack of commercial specialists has been one of the most consistent points of contrast between the Maya and other early urban cultures (see Masson 2002a for an excellent summary). As it turns out, most early cities had few full-time specialists (Skinner 1977:277; M. E. Smith 2004:83), but many did have attached, as well as semi-independent, semi-specialized producers. Specialist workshops were probably exceptional everywhere (Costin and Hagstrum 1995; M. E. Smith 2004) and not crucial for commerce, which can include multiple variations of barter, trade, and exchange.

Clearly, although all cities have some things in common, many types of settlement

can be included in this term. Past models that characterized cities as resulting from a particular evolutionary trajectory and performing specific functions in a standardized social and cultural framework have been overturned by identification of the very wide range of urban forms and functions that exist even within a single culture (Marcus 1989, 1993, 1998). It may even be true in some cases that the variation between contemporary cities provides the interaction and tension required to develop and sustain them (Hansen 2000a).

The recognition that there were multiple types of cities and many interacting states means that regional analysis is key to understanding the functioning of cities, but the fact that interrelationships among polities are flexible and complex makes it difficult to determine which "region" is relevant or large enough to document all interaction and interrelationships. I think that this is especially problematic for the Maya. First of all, the boundaries of the regions that define Maya cities are not merely geographical; they are ideological, economic, political, and social (Ashmore 1989; Ashmore and Sabloff 2002, 2003; Ball 1993; Marcus 1974, 1976, 1983b, 1993, 1998, 2000[1983b], 2003a) and may be impossible to document and are thus invisible to archaeologists. This is a point Marcus (1984) has made in her discussion of the cosmological significance of the distribution of Maya cities. To some extent, regions create cities (Hansen 2000a; Trigger 2003; Yoffee 2005), but cities also create and define their regions: for example, a city can have a cosmological locus that is not geographically "accurate" (Ashmore and Sabloff 2002; Marcus 1983b, 1984, 1993).

A city can also have an economically or politically important relationship with a distant city or region (Marcus 1993). The assumption that transport costs precluded the exchange of subsistence goods applies only to some Maya cities because certainly those located on arterial rivers could have depended on bulk transport of corn or other subsistence items. In fact, riverine transport might create a tighter link between cities than proximity if the nearer city must be reached overland or through inhospitable territory. Commercialization is a means of buffering the periodic local shortfalls that face all farmers via access to nonlocal resources; the desirability of connections across resource zones is obvious. Such connections might also be brought to bear on conflicts between neighboring cities.

Archaeologists and others have considered these sorts of interrelationships as evidence of ancient-world systems (Gunder-Frank and Gills 1993; Hall and Chase-Dunn 1993; Upham 1990; Wallerstein 1977), but it is possible for external influences to be significant and even generative without being systematic. Individual agency, especially among political figures (Flannery 1999), historical events, such as the conquest of the New World (Wolf 1982), and environmental catastrophes, which, contrary to the assumptions of prime-mover models (Gill 2001), are likely to have unpredictable and varied results at a micro-environmental level (Pyburn 1998), all regularly influence early states. Such factors have systemic consequences, but individuals and unique events are not systems, though archaeological recognition of the distinction can be difficult. Galactic polities, interaction spheres, and core buffers are difficult to disprove; arguments identifying them tend to become circular.

Archaeologists identify "basic needs" as basic because they were widely traded—and widely traded because they were basic (Rathje 1972, 1975). Obsidian is useful, but people will not die without it, nor would the demise of obsidian trade have destroyed Maya civilization. The same is true of hard stone; I have seen plenty of teeth from Classic-period Maya people who made do without it. Salt is more crucial, but very few populations were demonstrably unable to provision themselves (Marcus 1983a:477). As it happens, there appears to have been a variety of types of salt (Andrews and Mock 2002; Dahlin and Ardren 2002; Dillon et al. 1988; Kepecs 1999; Masson 2002b; McKillop 2002, 2005; Nance 1992) and probably regional, ethnic, or even personal preferences, as was the case for salt trade in other parts of the ancient world.

Elites and Production

Despite Polanyi's (1944, 1957) current unpopularity amongst anthropologists (but see Halperin 1994 for a holdout), many archaeologists still recognize a split between prestige economy and market economy. Conventionally, Mayanists argue that people settle on land best suited to their needs (McAnany 1995:110) but then fall under the sway of elites, who squeeze them for support by forcing them to produce surpluses and tribute through intensification and specialization (Chase and Chase 1996; Foias 2002). The goal of the elites is to control surplus production to aggrandize themselves both at home and abroad. Access to nonlocal resources is important for the establishment and maintenance of elite status. Some archaeologists have proposed that prestige and market economies coexisted in parallel universes (Abrams 1994; Feldman 1985; Foias 2002; McAnany 1993), but this might be a false dichotomy (Inomata 2001). Certainly, cities and states will have to be evaluated individually for evidence of how separate or interrelated were various strands of their economies.

The idea of a two-tiered economy of elite trade in ritual or symbolic commodities and household trade in "needs" (Trigger 2003:404) is fueled by the idea that elites supported full-time specialists only to provide material reification of their status. This suggests a closed system, in which people turn a blind eye to obvious commercial opportunities. The empirical difficulty with this proposition is that, although Maya prestige goods show up in prestigious contexts (not all these arguments are circular), examples of nearly all prestige goods also show up in ordinary burials and houses (West 2002). Even if this distribution began as the result of elite-controlled redistribution (Masson 2002a), it is still the case that ordinary people had high-status goods, which they themselves could "redistribute." This access to high-status goods undermines the idea that prestige goods served to aggrandize only elites and reify an absolute difference between elites and everyone else. A more convincing argument that better fits the archaeological data on Maya commodities would be that elites had better quality, and a larger quantity, of goods that everybody wanted and that aggrandizement served the elite by allowing them to define and advertise the most desirable goods.

I am unconvinced that elites controlled very much production because there would be so much effort involved that there would be little point in being elite. If

elite control is taken to mean that the elite were actually the producers (Foias 2002:229; McAnany 1993; McAnany et al. 2002), most types of unmechanized production require investment and coordination of a significant amount of labor. Elizabeth Graham has pointed out:

> If elites painted polychromes, they also needed body clays, slip clays, paints, brushes, holders, resins, cleaners, paper for designs, mineral pigments, stands, wooden rollers, tempers, kilns, firewood, and sponges, not to mention help in preparing surfaces, preparing ingredients, stoking fires, regulating airflow, getting lunch on time, settling clays, toting water, ordering supplies, keeping track of transactions, training and feeding apprentices, and cleaning up the mess at the end of the production day. [Graham 2002:414]

According to Trigger, elites in all early civilizations "controlled a disproportionate amount of the wealth of their societies, avoided physical labor, enjoyed an opulent lifestyle, and indulged in conspicuous consumption" (Trigger 2003:153). But (with apologies to Marx) controlling wealth does not require control of production. A prestige-economy model does not explain the complexity of the archaeological record of the Maya, either in the variety or in the distribution of commodities (Masson 2002b; West 2002).

In addition to requiring considerable administration and non-elite labor, control of production is difficult and inefficient. As Janusek (2002) has pointed out, the diversity of interest groups may be both the foundation of urban life and a threat to it. Thinking from the archaeological record has given us an impoverished idea of pre-industrial specializations. In the cities in late imperial China, where 80 percent of the residents were farmers and specialists were mostly part-time (Skinner 1977:265), there was an immense variety of specializations, including various types of musicians, diviners, messengers, gamblers, traders, charlatans, pettifoggers, and scribes, most of whose efforts would be archaeologically invisible. In these cities, the residences of crafts and trades people of many specialties were intermingled with residences of their wealthy patrons and merchants. Because all production took place within households whose economy was primarily agrarian (both elite and non-elite), very small amounts of evidence of this sort of production would be detectable in midden and activity areas. Associations between producers, such as guilds, were formed precisely because their dispersed members had little physical contact. Undoubtedly, late imperial China had some of the most commercialized of all pre-industrial cities, so this example shows the archaeological invisibility of specialists even when prevalent. Early cities would not need many practitioners of each specialty; usually one or two in each craft would be sufficient. Control of such diversity could be difficult.

Elites who are supported by landholdings have administrative problems. Life is often better and more interesting for the upper classes in large urban centers, where there is more access to commodities and where they can curry favor with other elites (Skinner 1977; Trigger 2003). Finding someone reliable and trustworthy to watch over their rural

estates without slacking or skimming was difficult. Japanese history is replete with examples of complications arising from this situation (Sansom 1963); usually family members are drafted for the job, but even sons and daughters can be treacherous.

I see producers' private ownership of land as an important early stimulus to urbanism and elites, as more inspirational than omnipotent. This is completely compatible with the probability that some elites in early cities were supported by controlling production on their estates as absentee landlords and by production from collectively owned or institutional land (Trigger 2003:662; Yoffee 2005). However, cross-cultural data overwhelmingly indicate that small family farms are much more efficient producers than collectives, sharecroppers, or coerced labor for estates. Profit motives of landowning families, combined with their micro-environmentally specific knowledge, make for levels of productivity with which no communal or coercive authority can compete (Netting 1993). Considering the small proportion of a city that had any sort of special status—less than 20 percent (Trigger 2003:155)—the mechanism for forced production on a significant scale is difficult to envision. There is no evidence that the Maya had the elaborate administrative hierarchies or standing armies used in Chinese, Inka, or Mexican cities; pomp and circumstance hardly seem sufficient to create a Foucaultian (Foucault 1995) internalized hegemonic ideology (Demarest 1992; Houston et al. 2003). The distribution of trade goods may indicate, as Freidel (1981) and West (2002) have suggested, that elites controlled distribution, but how did they do it? Household middens at most Maya sites contain evidence of at least a few luxury goods. How did elites profit from the purchasing power of smallholders who had everything they needed? Why do smallholders buy things they do not need? How do elites gain political and economic power and hold on to it by controlling the distribution of non-essential goods? The answer is that they define needs and do everything they can to inspire and orchestrate *consumption*. Elite displays of exotic or manufactured consumer goods serve to foment "need" and emulation by non-elites.

Smallholders, Peasants, and Production

Overemphasis on elite control of production stems from a misunderstanding of how most agrarian households function. Certainly, several types of land tenure and various methods of food production were operating among ancient Maya communities, including corporately held village lands, share cropping, wealthy estates, and so on. However, understanding the very efficient production strategies of *smallholders*, individual farming households working on hereditary land (Netting 1993), is key to understanding Maya urbanism. Smallholders improve their land to intensify production, thereby making less land produce more and enabling populations to live closer together. Smallholders form communal workgroups to help one another during brief periods, adding another layer of logic to their tendency to cluster. Investment increases the value of land, so families become place-bound even in situations where unimproved land is not scarce (thereby answering Trigger's [2003] question about why the Maya did not occupy more territory than they did).

Netting came up with the concept of smallholders in contradistinction to the Marxist evolutionary model developed by Chayanov (1966 [1925]). Netting collected his data from the Alpine Swiss and the Nigerian Kofyar, where he expected to find peasants laboring just enough to meet the subsistence needs of their lineages and the disruptive external demands resulting from their incorporation into the market economy of the modern world system. Instead, he found that the unit of economic organization was the household, not the lineage, and that market participation was long-standing (traditional) and motivated at the household level. In both cultures, the social unit of consumption and production, the household, was not defined by kinship; instead, he found kin relations generated and defined by the ownership and divisibility of resources and land. The Kofyar say, "Our parents are the people who feed us."

Although Netting worked with extant cultures, he saw a major part of the difficulty with Marxist models resulting from assumptions about a primordial system, similarly assumed by Sahlins (1972), which was interrupted and turned into a system of peasant exploitation by the rise of class-based society. Though Netting agreed that farmers are often exploited, he found that exploitation and external pressure were not prerequisites of intensive agriculture, nor did he find intensification exclusively the outcome of population growth. Instead, he found farmers voluntarily diversifying and intensifying their production for reasons of their own, such as the maximization of profits, hedging against inflation and poor harvests, long-term sustainability, permanent residence, and increasing the quality of life.

Netting (1993:7) argued that evolutionary models "pigeonholed farmers by contrasting technologies," relegating systems with simpler tools, fragmented fields, greater labor input, and "pre-scientific knowledge" into an earlier and lower category of subsistence. He felt that this reified false contrasts because the comparison between mechanized and unmechanized farming failed to account for the difference in productivity possible with different types of land and technology. Mechanization on Alpine farms, for example, would simply not allow the intensity of production that Swiss smallholders generate: the amount of hours of labor per unit of land might fall with mechanization, but the hours *per unit of production* would actually rise.

Similarly, production on a scale beyond the capacity of smallholders, such as the working of huge estates by slaves or laborers, could never be as efficient or as productive in terms of hours of labor per unit of production as a more fragmented and more autonomous smallholder strategy. Seasonal and micro-zonal variation can be handled more reliably with local strategies, and people will agree to a greater degree of effort within their households if the profits will ultimately be their own. Land improvements and maintenance are more reliably and cheaply accomplished by a skilled workforce that will inherit the benefits of its own efforts, than by slaves or micromanaged labor. This argument is not only logical; Netting collected convincing empirical data to support it. The key, he believed, was land: land rights, land ownership, land value, and land improvability.

The Chayanovian model, which is most familiar to archaeologists, was based on peasant farmers living in an environment where land was not scarce (the Russian

Steppe) and where the improvement of fields was not possible. Steppe requires little clearing, and draft animals were available to break up the soil. The steppe climate is such that no amount of improvement will allow more than one crop per year, because the growing season is determined by long, cold winters. In contrast, the Kofyar and the Swiss work a circumscribed amount of land that repays investment. This means that rather than deplete the land, as with extensive swidden, land use over time requires improvements and maintenance that actually increase its productivity and value. This may mean more than one crop per year, which is tantamount to increasing or even doubling the amount of available land. Land value is related less to ease of exploitation than to improvability and to attachment to place. Stone, Netting, and Stone (1990) describe a situation in which Kofyar moved into an uninhabited area and farmed in a much more extensive way than they had in their previous overcrowded context. But within a few years of their move, the repayment of obligations and the integration of their society through the formation of task groups stimulated them to reestablish intensive strategies that allowed them to continue normal relations with the relatives and friends they had left behind. Social structure had a self-perpetuating effect on subsistence strategy by encouraging intensification, land improvements, and an attachment to place. Perpetual reuse of house sites and long sequences of burial and reburial in house floors convincingly argue that Maya householders felt a similarly strong attachment to place (McAnany 1993) as do people in many parts of the world (Goody 1962).

Smallholders have three particularly important characteristics that relate to the origin of cities. Foremost is that they *love* surpluses. Agriculture is never a safe enterprise, and any sort of cushion is desirable, so smallholders voluntarily produce as much as they can. Of course, many factors affect how much this will be, including the health and composition of any household, unpredictable weather, and the choice of crops, which may vary from year to year. But as long as smallholders control their own productivity and benefit from it, they will produce as much surplus as is feasible. Such farmers produce much more, in fact, than farmers working for a community or for an absentee landlord, because being forced to produce a surplus for a landlord offers limited benefit and can set a taxation standard impossible to sustain in all years.

There are other ways to create an economic cushion, and smallholders also love to diversify: any household with sufficient labor will add crafts to food production or acquire specialized skills to accumulate resources and stimulate reciprocal obligations among producers. Availability of extra hands is the only requirement for specialization. Weaving, pottery making, tool making, midwifery, necromancy, and so on, are all strategies of accumulation of either real wealth or social indebtedness that mitigate the effects of bad weather, family tragedy, political upheaval, and crop failure that plague all agricultural communities. No coercion is involved, except perhaps between family members, in order for craft production to emerge. But, obviously, there is a limit to how much diversification can cushion one household among many, all subject to the same pressures. If everybody's crop succumbs to drought, the fact that one neighbor owes another a bushel of corn makes little difference, and nobody will be interested in ready-made pots. So smallholders love markets. They go great distances

to reach them, and there is even some indication that they can create them (Netting 1993). Elites do not need to control or force surplus production of foods or crafts: there are more efficient ways to profit.

Although Netting (1993) saw smallholding as a robust cross-cultural pattern, he did not see smallholding as an evolutionary stage, and he was not interested in explaining social change. His data showed that smallholders exist today within the world system in cultures that have been called tribes and chiefdoms, as well as those characterized as states. Smallholders in all sociopolitical contexts endure household fortunes that oscillate dramatically from generation to generation. His longitudinal study documented that a smallholding economy was stable and did not produce hereditary elites, because no household was ever able to sustain an economic advantage beyond a single generation. But under the conditions of social life at the start of urbanism, efficient, productive, concentrated, and vulnerably place-bound smallholders seem like an excellent foundation, and a perfect fertilizer, for a city. Urbanism may involve elite control of production but surely also results from elites reaping the benefits of smallholder enthusiasm for surpluses, diversification, and markets by stimulating consumption. In my conclusions, I discuss how this was done, but first I will show how this argument applies to archaeological data.

Chau Hiix, Altun Ha, and Lamanai: A conurbation on the New River

Maya speakers settled three communities between New River Lagoon and the Caribbean Ocean during the Preclassic period in what is today north-central Belize. The three communities—Lamanai, Altun Ha, and Chau Hiix—are geographically contiguous and historically and politically interrelated, so I have chosen to call their territory a *conurbation*, which refers to a number of cities or towns that form one continuous settlement area (figure 13.1). Areas of the New River Conurbation that have no evidence of settlement are inhospitable environments or places where site formation processes conceal and destroy archaeological remains. Comparison of the history and interrelations of these three settlements offers some compelling arguments for the significance of smallholders and commerce to the development of cities.

Chau Hiix, the site of my own research for the past fifteen years, lies slightly to the southwest of the center point of a straight line drawn across the 40 km of territory between the monumental centers of Altun Ha and Lamanai. The three sites are at different stages of investigation and reporting. Altun Ha is the most completely reported of the three (Pendergast 1979, 1982, 1984, 1990, 1992, 1998). Lamanai, having been under investigation and published widely since the 1970s, is also well known. Chau Hiix was discovered only in 1989 (Pyburn 1991) but has been continuously researched since then and has appeared in a variety of publications (Pyburn 1996, 1997, 1998, 2003, 2004, 2005) and theses (Andres 2000, 2005; Cook 1997; Cuddy 2000; Goldsmith 2004; Meier 2003; Metcalfe 2005; Sweely 1996, 2005; Wille 2007; Wrobel 2004).

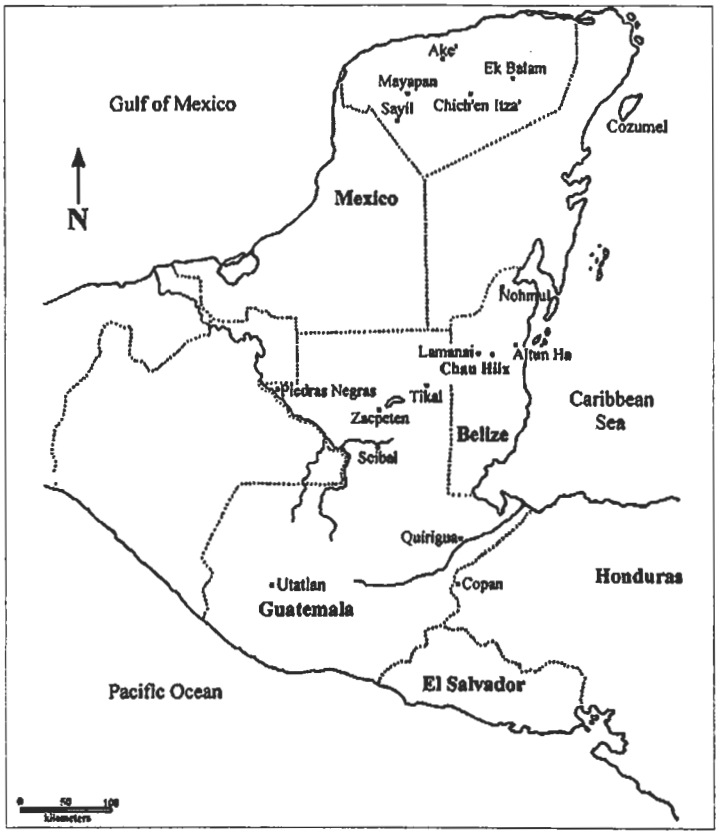


Figure 13.1. Map of the Maya lowlands.

Despite their proximity and obvious connection, the three settlements have distinct archaeological patterns and historical trajectories. Although all three were settled in the Preclassic period, Lamanai—the westernmost city—was still occupied during the Spanish Conquest, and its history includes a Spanish church (Graham 2004; Pendergast 1991, 1993). Chau Hiix, the smallest settlement, also lasted into the Spanish Conquest. In contrast, Altun Ha was depopulated after the ninth century AD (Pendergast 1979), a period of Maya history that has long fascinated archaeologists (Sabloff 1992, 1994; Wilk 1985).

Lamanai (Submerged Crocodile) (figure 13.2), some 40 km from Altun Ha and 15 km from Chau Hiix, is situated on the western edge of New River Lagoon, with immediate access to the New River's arterial connection to the ocean and the Petén. Settlement is aligned with the lagoon edge, and all the plaza groups in the urban core are aligned north-south (Pendergast 1992). Lamanai is by far the largest of the three cities; the nine courtyards (Adams and Jones 1981) in its monumental core cover more area (1.5 km) and contain larger buildings than exist at either Altun Ha or Chau Hiix. The known settlement of Lamanai covers 4.5 km, encompassing 720 structures, though house mounds are rarely absent where land types permit farming.

Despite their consistent north-south orientation, plaza distribution in the site cen-

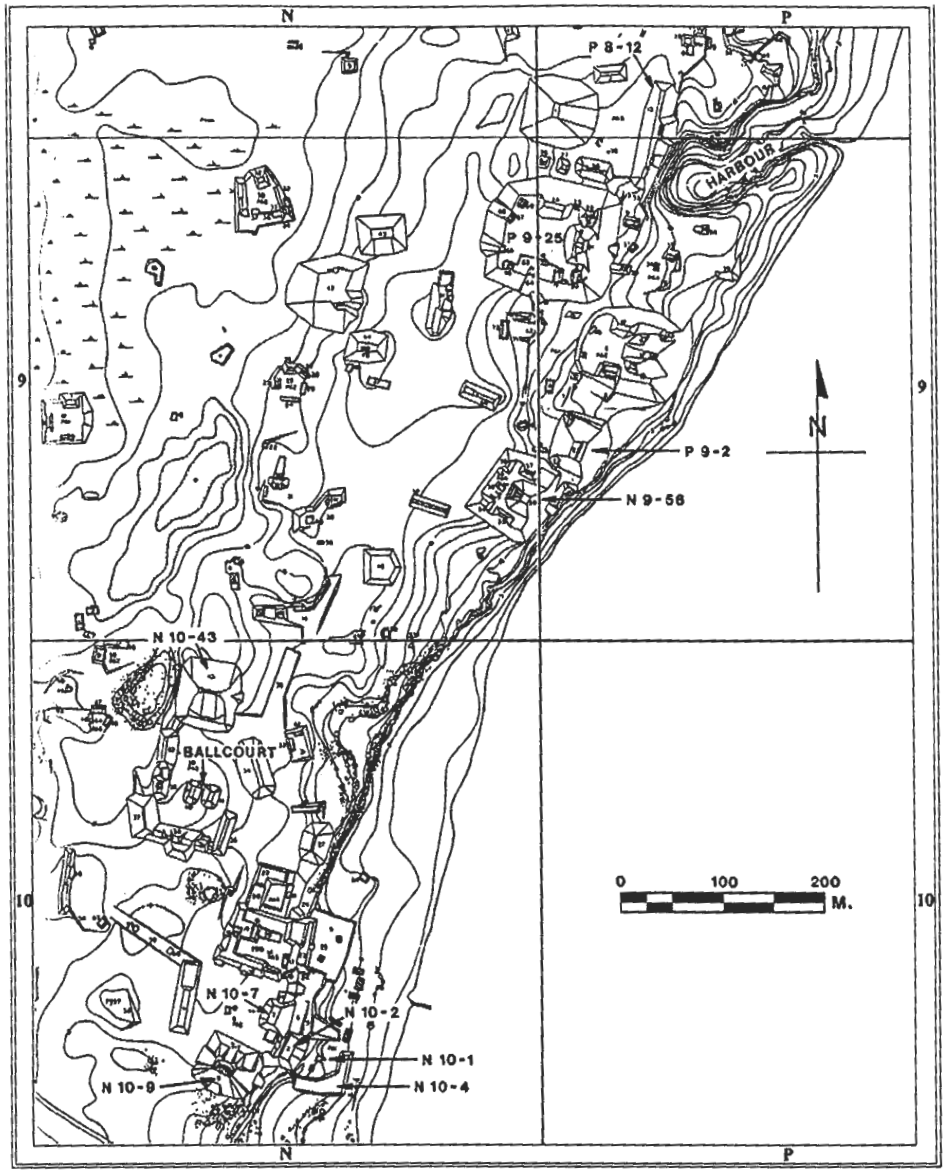


Figure 13.2. Lamanai: map of the central settlement area showing the final layout and the number designations of the main buildings. Contour interval is 1 meter (after Pendergast 1981:33, figure 3).

ter seems to follow no preexisting plan (Pendergast 1992). The settlement appears to have developed haphazardly by accretion rather than according to an urban plan. Similarly, the distribution of settlement outside the center follows no recognizable pattern. Soils in this locus are some of the finest in northern Belize (Wright et al. 1959), and there is evidence that wetlands along the river were modified for agricultural use (Pendergast, personal communication, 1991).

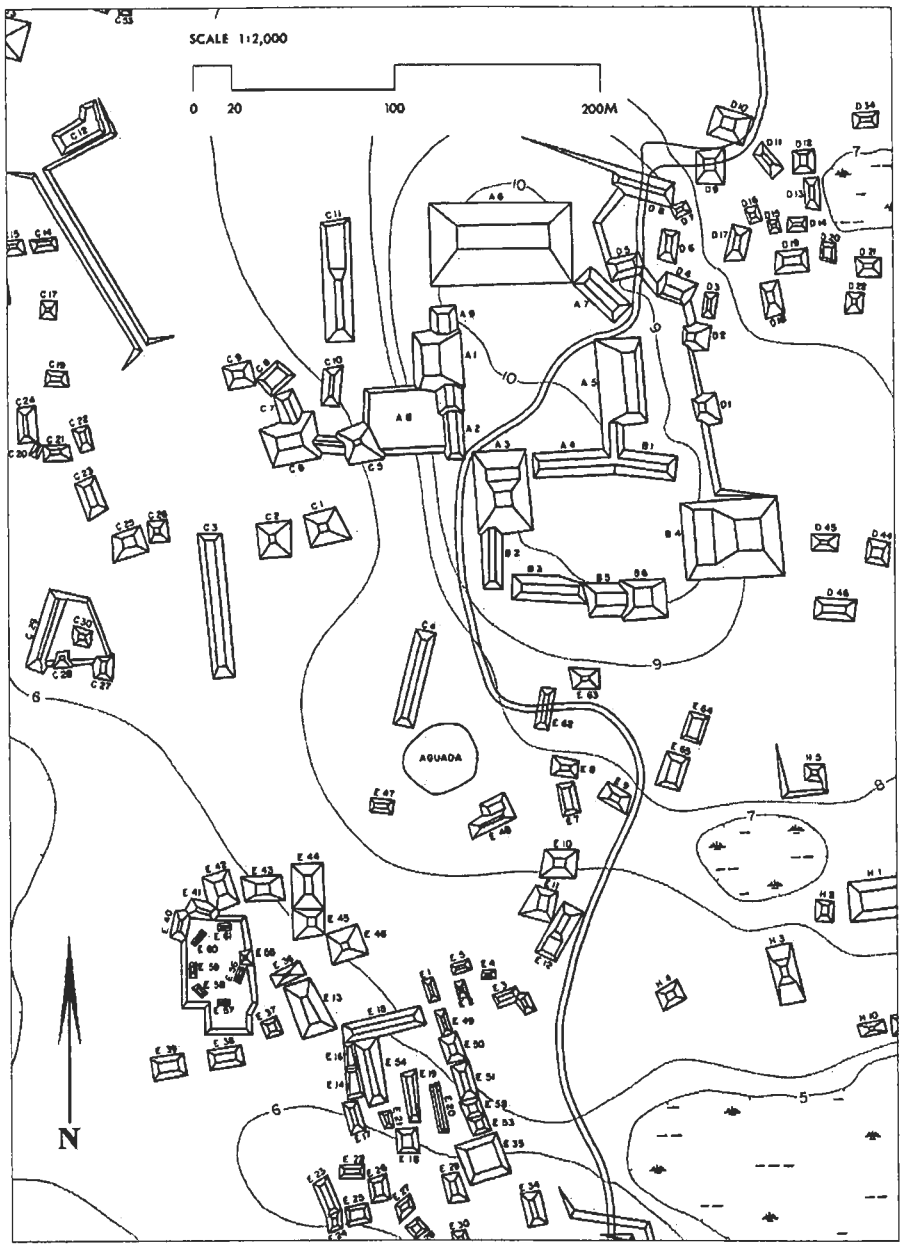


Figure 13.3. Altun Ha: map of the central settlement area showing the final layout and the number designations of the main buildings (excerpted from Pendergast 1979: Altun Ha base map, map 2).

Altun Ha (Rock Stone Pond; figure 13.3) lies 25 km east of Chau Hiix, 12 km west of the Caribbean Ocean, and 8.3 km from Midwinter Lagoon, the nearest standing freshwater source. Although characterized as "effectively coastal" (Pendergast 1979), Altun Ha's location suggests a compromise between access to waterborne trade, which would have required a significant (though reasonable) hike, and protection from

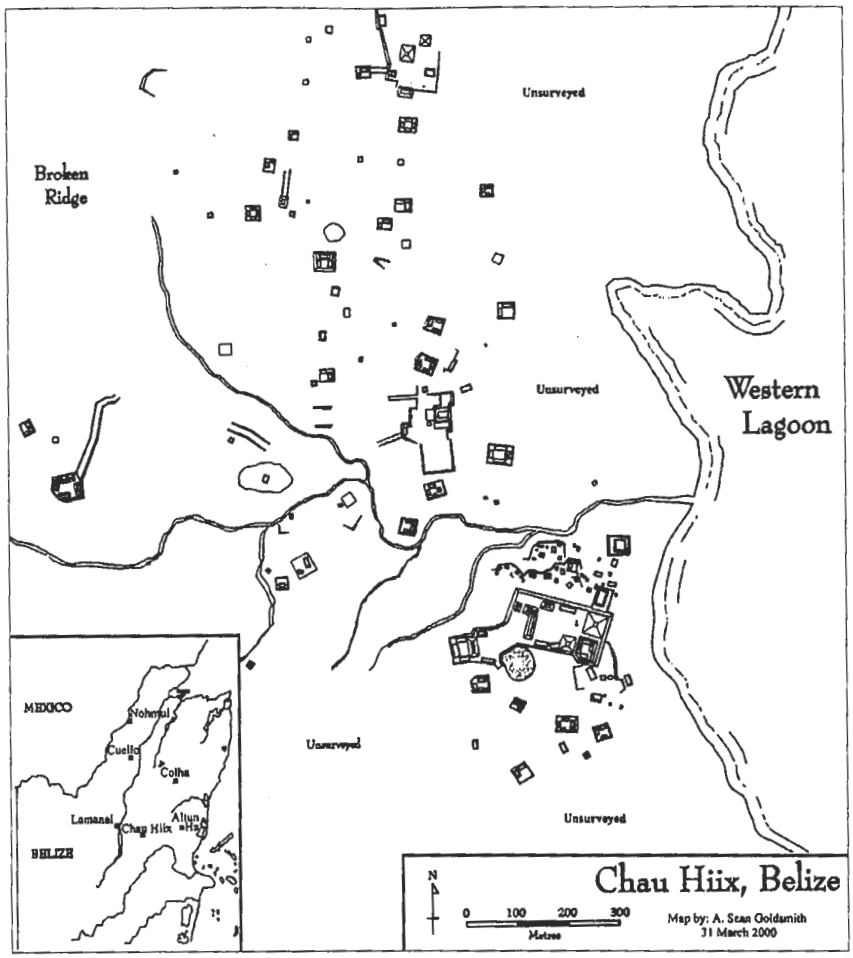


Figure 13.4. Chau Hiix: map of the central settlement area showing the final layout of the main buildings (map by A. S. Goldsmith).

ocean-transported marauders and weather. Unlike other members of the conurbation, Altun Ha has no watercourse to hug; its settlement plan is relatively concentric. The orientation of its monumental buildings is inconsistent, but their layout appears to be more planned than that of Lamanai. In all standard measures of site size, Altun Ha is second to Lamanai, with five courtyards in its site core covering only half a kilometer (Andres 2005; Pendergast 1984). Though large and ornate, none of Altun Ha's buildings are as massive as the great structures of central Lamanai.

Altun Ha's known settlement area is estimated at 2.33 km, encompassing 516 structures in an unplanned distribution. Though considerably larger in almost all respects than Chau Hiix, Altun Ha has less high-quality arable land directly associated with its settlement than does either of its neighbors. It also has no reported evidence of agricultural intensification.

Chau Hiix (*jaguarundi*, figure 13.4) settlement follows the western shore of a seasonal watercourse known as Western Lagoon, which is fed by Spanish Creek, giving its

residents New River access to waterborne traffic passing Lamanai. The importance of this connection is demonstrated by enormous dams and canals dug during the Classic period to create a year-round channel to Spanish Creek. Although the settlement parallels the north-south line of the lagoon, both plazas in the site center are oriented east-west (Andres 2005). The site center covers only .2 km, and though the known site area is now at 2.5 km, slightly larger than Altun Ha, the structure count to date is at 375, making Chau Hiix undeniably the smallest city in the New River Conurbation.

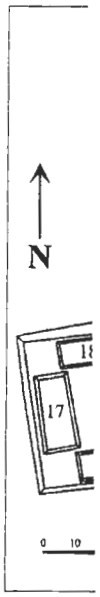
Nevertheless, Chau Hiix has immediate access to the best (and the most) agricultural land of the three communities (Pyburn 2003, 2005; Wright et al. 1959). It also has abundant evidence of raised-bed terraces west of site center (Cuddy 2000; Goldsmith 2004), suggesting intensification through water control and fertility management as documented at other Belize sites (Scarborough et al. 1995). Further, the canals and dams that modified the hydrology of Western Lagoon (Andres and Pyburn 2004; Pyburn 2003) improved both access to trade routes and agricultural production; Chau Hiix has significant evidence of drained, raised, and possibly island fields. Its hydrological modifications may have made it possible to grow two crops per year (Pyburn 2004).

Consumption at Chau Hiix

Chau Hiix's access to trade routes allowed residents to consume the usual suite of exotic goods, including small amounts of pearls, hematite mirrors, and carved slate, jadeite, and *Spondylus* shell. In terms of locally available resources, Chau Hiix appears to have had everything essential, which may explain why the site was settled as early as any known Maya community. Chert, though not particularly high quality but certainly adequate for making any sort of tool, is so abundant in the natural substrate that the monumental structures of the site are built from chalcedony boulders. Local clays are suitable for making pottery; experiments by my students have achieved reasonable success with little attention to temper or firing.

Requirements for intensive and sustainable agriculture were more than met. Reliable water from natural springs, rivers, and the seasonal lagoon was supplemented by a system of reservoirs designed to catch runoff from the main platform. Smaller reservoirs appear to be scattered among the agricultural terraces west of the site center, seasonal water shortages to accommodate (Cuddy 2000; Goldsmith 2004). In addition to excellent local soils suitable for intensified agriculture through terracing, modifications to the adjacent lagoon and river system provided still more control of water resources and made it possible to produce an even greater agricultural surplus (Pyburn 2003).

This same system also brought water transport directly to the site entrance and connected Chau Hiix to an inland water route between the central Petén and the Belize Valley that passes by Lamanai. The passage is open much of the year but would have been especially easy to navigate (the rivers flow backward) when hurricanes made sea trade risky (Pyburn 2003). Best of all, the entrance to the site on the water would be easy to conceal and defend. The site's main monument (figure 13.5) overlooks this



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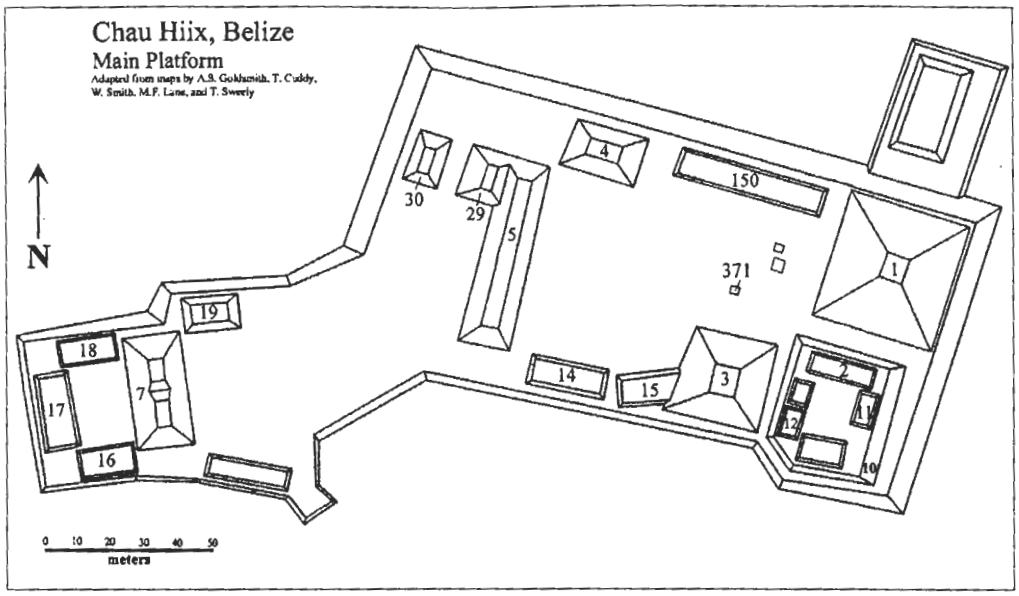

Figure 13.5. Chau Hiix: map of the central platform showing the Terminal to Early Postclassic layout and the number designations of the main buildings.

entrance from a distance of about a kilometer, so unwelcome guests who had managed to get past Lamanai could be spotted and intercepted (Andres and Pyburn 2004; Pyburn 2003). It is possible to see the tallest buildings of Lamanai from the top of Structure 1 at Chau Hiix. A small quantity of Chau Hiix obsidian was sourced in 1997; 9 pieces were from Ixtepeque, 33 were from El Chayal, and a single artifact was from San Martín Jilotepeque.

Despite local abundance, Chau Hiix's consumption patterns suggest dependence on importation of ordinary household goods, not just exotic elite wares, and imply that the settlement was not economically self-sufficient for much of its history. Chau Hiix, literally drowning in chalcedony, is full of imported chert. I have resisted this as nonsense for years, but Beverly Chiarulli, the lithic analyst for the project, has finally convinced me that there are no local sources for the sort of chert used for many finer tools at Chau Hiix. There are expedient flake tools, chunky bifaces, and occasional pressure-flaked masterpieces made of Chau Hiix chalcedony, but a surprising percentage of the assemblage, including that from house mounds, is chert from somewhere besides Chau Hiix. Much of it is the fine-grained banded or honey-colored stone thought to come from Colha, suspected to be a supplier of tools (Hester et al. 1994) and boats (Wilk 1976). We have no complete reduction sequences for Colha-type chert at Chau Hiix (Chiarulli 2006), despite years of screening middens in search of such data.

In addition to imported chert, Chau Hiix residents consumed huge quantities of obsidian. We find it everywhere, all over the ground, in every excavation, in every burial. Tomb 1 was covered with sacks of it (and also with a bushel of flakes of imported honey-colored chert). Tombs 2 and 3 had polyhedral obsidian cores.

Chau Hiix residents also imported quantities of sea shells, especially conch, which they carved into beads, scoops, and decorative plaques. Six of the seven largest plazuela groups nearest the site center yielded evidence of shell carving in the Terminal Classic (Cook 1997). Postclassic surface offerings often include whole conch shells of varying species and sizes.

Chau Hiix residents apparently also purchased ceramics. Chau Hiix has an unusual quantity of blackware pottery. According to the project ceramic analyst, Bob Fry (personal communication, 2003), blackware is so abundant at Chau Hiix that it was almost certainly locally produced, though perhaps not at the household level. Although it has often been suggested that fancy wares were made by specialists and traded or presented to ordinary people by elites, specialist production of plainwares (whether or not local) is less frequently argued and not easy to demonstrate. However, ordinary ceramics were probably not a household product at Chau Hiix, because the variety of plainware shapes and sizes is more limited than we might expect from idiosyncratic production (almost every excavation turns up one of about three to four types of redware bowl, each era having its own set). But more convincing in this regard is the frequency with which ordinary vessels were mended (holes were drilled in adjoining pieces, and the broken pots were tied together). Unfortunately, I cannot say how commonly this mending occurs at Lamanai and Altun Ha, but the practice is relatively uncommon at other Belize sites where I have excavated.

We have kept track of all mend holes found at Chau Hiix and have discovered that blackwares were almost never mended, as we might expect if they were readily available, nor usually were polychromes, which might be prestigious and valuable but perhaps not essential to daily life. What is most surprising is that the redware or even plainware pots have frequently been mended, suggesting that these were harder to replace or do without than either blackwares or polychromes and were not the product of casual and ongoing household production. Mended pots appear in all types of deposit at Chau Hiix, but the greatest quantity of mended pots was discovered in a Terminal Classic "problematic deposit" (Iglesias Ponce de León 2003) that also contained jade beads, modeled vessels, obsidian blades and cores, whole and broken tools, carved bone and shell, and human teeth (Wille 2007).

Buying Power at Lamanai

These consumption patterns do not appear to be unique to Chau Hiix. After digging at Chau Hiix for fifteen years, I cannot quantify the difference, but the magnitude of commodities from caches, burials, and tombs from Lamanai dwarfs the discoveries at Chau Hiix to insignificance. We have a single example of several types of elaborate pottery at Chau Hiix that are known from multiple examples at Lamanai. So far, we have not found anything at Chau Hiix that has not been found (in greater quantity) at Lamanai. Lamanai's material cultural record, in terms of its portable artifacts, easily rivals that of Altun Ha, with the caveat that many of the most dramatic commodities from Lamanai are from the Postclassic, after Altun Ha was depopulated.

Lamanai is, of course, by far the biggest of these three sites. Chau Hiix's site center would probably fit into Structure P 9-25, which is a single courtyard group at Lamanai. I suspect that when settlement areas are better known, Chau Hiix will prove to cover as much territory as either Lamanai or Altun Ha, but its downtown would not have impressed its neighbors. In terms of masks, stelae, architectural volume, and elaborate exotic caches, Lamanai is the clear winner. Not only does it have a ball court, but also the ball-court marker was dedicated over a bowl of mercury (Pendergast 1998). The Chau Hiix ball-court marker is round and flat and had nothing buried under it.

Over time, all three sites became more crowded with buildings, and the individual buildings became more massive. This would occur from simple accretion as architecture was added over time, but because there was no obvious spatial constraint on any of the three centers, there seems to have been some intentional crowding. Andres (2005) has recently shown that during the Terminal Classic the central precincts of all three sites were made less accessible and less visible to casual observers. Enclosure was achieved through the addition of buildings and walls to block open spaces, the filling in of windows and doorways, and the raising of platform height so that the level of occupation was above the ordinary line of sight across the central platform.

Altun Ha: The Cost of Success

Imported goods are similarly common at Altun Ha; in fact, they are more prevalent than at Chau Hiix. It is hard to know what the per capita consumption of exotic or manufactured goods was, because the number of people in each community at any point in time is unknown. Overall, Altun Ha was obviously more prosperous than Chau Hiix; where Chau Hiix has yielded about ten eccentric chert objects from tombs and offerings, Altun Ha excavators have recovered dozens. The abundance of obsidian at Altun Ha includes eccentrics and green obsidian (Pendergast 2003), both unknown at Chau Hiix. Various pieces of carved jade have been recovered from burials at Chau Hiix; the quantity from Altun Ha is probably twenty times greater, including, of course, the 4.42-kilo jade head.

The entire central precinct of Chau Hiix would fit into the 200-m expanse between B6 and A6 at Altun Ha, and Altun Ha has a second courtyard almost as large. To date, Chau Hiix has no architectural masks; Altun Ha does. Interestingly, Chau Hiix does have a ball court; Altun Ha apparently does not.

After its crescendo of construction and wealth display, Altun Ha was depopulated rather rapidly after the ninth century. Lamanai, in contrast, kept right on flaunting its wealth and flourished into the Postclassic, as did Chau Hiix, perhaps by incorporating people moving in (or returning) from other places (Metcalfe 2005; Wrobel 2004).

At Altun Ha, abandonment of monumental buildings was followed by the intentional desecration of four royal tombs, suggesting an "inside job" (Pendergast 1992), and deposition of garbage onto the floors of beautifully vaulted rooms (Pendergast 1982). These buildings were eventually left to collapse on their own. In contrast, vaulted buildings were abandoned at Chau Hiix and Lamanai but were first strewn

with offerings and then carefully filled in through their opened vaults so that the room interiors were preserved. The exterior of some of these buildings was buried under a layer of chert boulders, which offered a second layer of protection.

It is tempting to suggest that respectful treatment of ancestral architecture indicates a continuity with the past that averted Postclassic disaster; unfortunately for this scenario, similar infilling and burial of monuments occurred at nearby La Milpa and at Xunantunich and its satellite Minanha (Iannone 2005), all of which were abandoned. Whatever community changes are signified by the burial of buildings, they were not necessarily fatal.

The fate of Altun Ha probably cannot be understood in terms of its immediate neighborhood; otherwise, Chau Hiix and Lamanai would have changed more dramatically. Following Flannery's idea of "hypercoherence" (1972, after Rappaport 1971), I have argued (Pyburn 1998) that the drama at the end of the ninth century AD resulted when the self-governing interdependence that characterized Maya states briefly gave way to larger macro-states, or perhaps a hegemonic state (Marcus 1993; Trigger 2003:113). The widespread changes archaeologists have documented over a wide area of the Maya lowlands, occurring during a short period and including resource shortages, drought, and warfare, were not the causes of political change, for these problems had been dealt with successfully during the preceding centuries. Instead, the inability to cope with these exigencies at the appropriately micro-environmental level possible under self-government, foreclosed on cities bound to a centralized authority. In particular, interference with the direct intercity collaboration crucial for settlement continuity through times of resource stress and political disagreement would account for the sudden archaeological visibility of a variety of local difficulties.

But the question remains, why was Altun Ha unable to call on its neighbors? We can speculate that it had done so in the past, when Chau Hiix's central monument looked more like B-4 at Altun Ha (Pendergast, personal communication, 1991) and when it received a stucco cylinder vase from central Mexico at roughly the same time that Altun Ha received its cache of central Mexican green obsidian (Pendergast 1998). I suspect that Chau Hiix's single carved stela appeared, though it is currently fragmentary and illegible, about the time Altun Ha got into difficulties. Marcus's (1993, 1995a) idea that the sudden appearance of emblem glyphs among small communities indicates competitive sublords seeking autonomy from larger political units could be seen as a support for my suggestion that there was a new political element to resist. At the same time that stelae suggest independence, they also indicate participation in a wider system; these monuments tacitly recognize a preexisting authority by employing its symbols.

Superficially, this is an inversion of the more widely accepted argument that the proliferation of emblem glyphs, stelae, and the iconography of kingship in local areas indicates increased competition for power amongst upstart local kings. I am proposing instead that the appearance of these monuments in local areas indicates increasing control—or attempts at control—by a centralized authority, because they signify

tighter inclusion of ever-smaller polities and towns into an overarching political economy with at least some degree of centralized authority. For example, building a post office in a small rural town does not signify independence of the town, but a closer tie to a centralized authority. Naming of towns and kings can aggrandize them—or help delegate responsibility, delineate authority, and increase control. However, this small twist to received wisdom has only minor explanatory value because the external imposition of a nonlocal authority structure could immediately result in just the sort of local rebellion and resistance envisioned in the original scenario. The only question is, who put up the stelae? Marcus notes (personal communication, 2005) that "given our timeframe, both incorporation strategies and resistance or succession strategies could be in motion."

Discussion: Smallholder Sustainability and the Success of Cities

Netting (1993) noted that smallholding frequently coexists with extensive agriculture; it is not simply land quality that dictates economy. History, culture, and technology, combined with climatic possibilities and human agency, also promote smallholding, not because of the raw productivity of land but because of its potential for improvement through investment. He also noted that though political upheaval and family fortunes may have short-term effects, in the long term, smallholder production remains stable (barring absolute natural or political catastrophe) and though surpluses remain high and the fortunes of individuals may vary, permanent class distinctions do not arise.

Where land investment is not feasible or not practiced, Chayanovian rules apply; productivity and the size of farms are tied directly to the need for food or to outside pressure by absentee landlords or hegemonic political regimes. Unlike smallholders, Chayanovian peasants have so much land available, they have no incentive to improve it and no reason to bequeath it, which also removes the means of improvement—the investment by place-bound family members into the property they will inherit. Netting also suggested that extensive systems are more vulnerable to outside pressures than are smallholders, whose land-tenure system, established surplus production, and economic diversification help them weather political and economic storms. Free from the leveling mechanisms of smallholding economies, Chayanovian peasants are a more likely locus of the origin of social classes, but also more vulnerable to the fate of the larger political economy in which they are embedded (Pyburn 1998).

Following Netting's predictions, I see Altun Ha populated by fewer smallholders and a relatively high percentage of Chayanovian peasants practicing more extensive forms of agriculture, probably as members of a wealthy estate. I see them most likely working for an absentee landlord with political ties and responsibilities to the power centers of the central Petén. This is why the trappings of elite status (large quantities of exotic sumptuary objects and significantly more baroque architecture and royally appointed tombs) are so visible at Altun Ha and why the distinctions between the

"haves" and the "have nots" reach such a crescendo at Altun Ha in the Late Classic (Andres 2005; Pendergast 1992). Wealth and power bestowed land ownership, whereas for smallholders, it is land tenure that creates stability and limits power. Producers at Altun Ha worked as hard as necessary for themselves and their masters and sought status through political and economic maneuvers that were not grounded in a resilient smallholder strategy. The predominance of extensive land-use strategies would have made Altun Ha more vulnerable to political forces than were its western neighbors. And exploitation by outsiders not only cut farmers off from the fruits of their labor but also diminished both their ability and their incentive to produce a surplus or actively diversify in order to seek markets and participate in trade.

Chau Hiix, on the other hand, was clearly a smallholder paradise. Though excellent land would have attracted settlers to both Lamanai and Chau Hiix, land offering a very high return on investment would have emphasized smallholding at Chau Hiix over time. Chau Hiix's smallholders would have had easy access to markets through Lamanai and would have benefited from its protection, but Chau Hiix residents would also have been subject to Lamanai's control of their consumption of imports. Lamanai, like Chau Hiix and Altun Ha, went through a Late Classic flurry of construction that created barriers between the rulers and the ruled and increased the control of movement within the monumental centers. But just as Altun Ha was "closing up shop," Lamanai and Chau Hiix razed walls, lowered building platforms, and produced evidence of new forms of power structure deemphasizing hierarchy; that is, a *popol na* (council house) was introduced into the main platform at each site (Andres 2005; Graham 2002). Construction, population, and production continued to be strong at Postclassic Lamanai and Chau Hiix, and trade continued to fill household middens with consumer goods.

Chau Hiix was the key to Lamanai's Postclassic success. By stimulating consumption at Chau Hiix and controlling its access to trade, Lamanai would have had a captive market and a source of surplus not easily disrupted by the route changes affecting other inland trade systems. Despite the local wealth and agricultural surplus Chau Hiix did produce, its elites do not appear to have competed with Lamanai or Altun Ha but may have underwritten their competition with one another. In the Postclassic, Chau Hiix's access to trade, long controlled by Lamanai, was also protected by it; Lamanai, however, with access to a reliable source of surplus that could be protected and concealed, was able to continue thriving in an era when such alliances were breaking down at other cities.

Pomp and Circumstance: Buying into the System

Although it is not revolutionary to suggest that elites succeeded where they were able to stimulate, sustain, and protect markets (Marcus 1993), not much has been written about this strategy as a motive for Maya architecture and city planning (Becker 2003; Loten 2003; Marcus 2003b; Sabloff 2003). Most discussions of site center defensibility focus on protection of the residents, either from the public or from marauders, not

protection of producers, consumers, and commercial interests. But this sort of environmental control might have been quite important.

Mayanists overemphasize elite aggrandizement and creation of Marxian false consciousness as the reason for monumental constructions. Individual aggrandizement was certainly intended, but these monuments are advertising the power of rulers and their families to do something. Their status as aggressive warriors and conquerors is much displayed, but why? Who was the audience for the claims of conquest over the neighbors? Was the visiting ruler from the next-door kingdom supposed to see the stele and become too frightened to invade? Were local farmers supposed to look at these advertisements and lay down tribute more willingly?

I think that we have been missing the phenomenological impact of Maya city centers, which we rarely juxtapose with the residences of ordinary farmers as they would have been in the Classic period. *National Geographic* has clouded our imaginations with paintings of tree-covered grounds around palaces and orderly kitchen gardens around thatched huts. And epigraphers have been too credulous of the documents they translate (Marcus 1992b), suggesting that Maya symbolism identifies rulership with natural symbols of power in the rainforest.

Actually, tropical gardens are not neat, and by the height of the Classic period, orchards were probably a commodity for wealthy people, if they existed at all, within city centers. In the tropics, insect infestations are a constant problem, and thatched houses attract vermin of all sorts: rats, bats, snakes, opossums, and vultures. Pelting rain melts buildings, and unremitting moisture rots food, clothing, documents—everything. An ordinary household would spend a tremendous amount of time trying to keep themselves and their possessions dry and free of insects and their food stores safe from mold, rats, and poor relations.

Bearing this situation in mind, the aspect of a large, elevated platform, plastered and painted, where not a single squirrel or sneak thief could pass unnoticed, must have been impressive to a rural visitor. From the center of the platform of even a small site like Chau Hiix, only human-created features would have been visible. Indeed, Maya architecture refers to nature, but not to respect for it, to domination of it. Maya rulers were advertising—and delivering—a controlled environment, safe from both natural elements and human raiders who would interfere with commerce.

Seeing Maya city centers as market enclaves makes sense of their layout, which, although variable, generally includes at least one open area that could be easily controlled and protected by surrounding towering structures. The stelae that decorate these venues do display the achievements of rulers and record their conquests, but they also emphasize the protective authority of rulership (Joyce 2000) and they certainly display the control of commodities to great advantage.

What clusters of smallholders offered elites was not just the chance to control production, but also a source of economic diversity and a concentration of active consumers. People will exploit their own households more thoroughly than any external authority if their surplus accrues to their advantage. Trade allows the conversion of

agricultural surplus into wealth and prestige, both buffers against misfortune but also opportunities for indulgence. The way elite are portrayed by most Mayanists makes it hard to see why anyone would want to be elite. They sacrificed and accumulated ritual objects for display and to propitiate deities. They struggled to dominate lazy and resistant, or else magnificently credulous, farmers in order to get control of a surplus that gave them power to distribute it to get more power. Power is seen as intrinsically valuable, rather than being the power to do or to have something (Pohl 1985).

Maya elites displayed their status goods because these were available to non-elites and elites benefited from making consumption desirable, possible, and safe. Not as much as elites, who controlled the system, ordinary people had some of just about anything available. The wide distribution of exotic items, including Rathje's (1972) basic needs (obsidian, hard stone, and salt), as well as the jade and polychromes found in the fill of the humblest house mounds in every Maya site, does not mean that there were no social strata. The surprising number of mended plainwares or simple redwares that might be assumed to be household produce shows that these items were avidly salvaged. This suggests, along with their profound uniformity, that they were acquired from specialists. Promoting consumption encourages specialization and is in the interests of people who want to increase their own wealth, as well as their power and political control over the rest of the population.

Most units of anthropological analysis—age groups, genders, warriors, weavers, households, families, lineages, regions, cities, and states—are at least partly units of consumption. In fact, we really have a modest amount of data on Maya production; what we have is an immense amount of data on consumption and some reliable ways of determining who consumed what. Consumption is an interesting process to look at during the formation of cities because it tends to be hierarchical and competitive in all societies; Gandhi's India is the only example I can think of where voluntary simplicity contributed to the formation of a new state, and that a reactionary one. If the thing to be consumed is unlimited, it does not motivate or explain social organization; water figures in societies in the desert. But there are improvements and motives that can make water figure elsewhere, such as proximity and "taste." These are the economic factors that elites try to control. Rathje has recently argued (2002) that this is why elites destroy wealth—to keep consumer goods scarce and under their control. This seems pretty inefficient, and there are easier ways to keep consumers interested in the market.

The ancient Maya elite were certainly involved in a prestige economy, but to a degree, all economies are prestige economies. Trade is very distantly connected to biological needs, but it is also tightly connected to social and political needs at all levels of society. Elite political motives do not forge an economy, but sociopolitical motives interact with economic motives to forge a city. One thing that elites do, both to hold on to their elite status and to stimulate consumption, is vary their repertoire. There is a very good reason why Maya kings look similar to one another but always significantly different and why ceramic styles sometimes create a "horizon." Masson (2002a) has suggested that Classic period regionalization in pottery styles implies elite control

of regionalized markets in domestic wares, but a close inspection of individual cities shows constant fluctuation in what appear to us to be minor differences. Rather than simply control distribution, I suggest that the elite influence the popularity of goods whose distribution they benefit from. Controlling access to places like Chau Hiix would certainly be rewarding and require minimal effort once the canals were dug and maintenance work assigned. Chau Hiix certainly had significant quantities of imported goods people did not *need*.

Consumption practices create both local and regional identities, proclaim independence and allegiance, and claim superiority or democratic standards at all levels of society. Elites maintain elite status not only by having the best or by controlling distribution, but by defining what the best is (Wilk 2004). Of course, material-culture distribution and variation are what archaeologists mostly see, but there are other types of consumption that are costly and elite, such as the acquisition of education, connoisseurship, and palate (Goody 1982).

One way elites stimulate markets and consumption is by sponsoring pageants, including sporting events, feasts, public displays, pilgrimages, and various sorts of aesthetic competition (Wilk 1995). The participants in these events accrue status, but it is the elites who sponsor them and retain the right to pick the winners, who implicitly verify their right to set standards of excellence and taste and motivate consumer practices to their own advantage (Pyburn 2004; Wilk 2004). Pageants and competitions seem more likely than "ritual ballgames and ceremonial battles" (Schele and Freidel 1990). Viewed in this light, the fact that Chau Hiix and Lamanai have similar ball courts might suggest one type of pageant. The "problematic deposit," described above with reference to the heavily mended redwares at Chau Hiix, suggests another, perhaps competitive feasting (Wille 2007). There is a similar deposit at Lamanai (Elizabeth Graham, personal communication, 2005).

Returning to my original argument, rather than cause increasing social complexity and the rise of urban centers and although probably tempting to elites, controlling production can create economic stress. Interference with local systems of production that have long, adaptive histories by top-down edicts has caused problems for many cultures in recent history (Pyburn 1997). Reduced diversification may make it possible to corner a market temporarily but reintroduces the vulnerability that smallholders diversify to avoid. It is important to remember that smallholders diversify on an agrarian base that they never willingly jeopardize. As long as elites focused on stimulating and controlling consumption, cities flourished in the Maya lowlands. But where elites managed to gain control of production to a degree that affected the subsistence economy, disaster followed. The demise of this sort of economic hegemony would account for the rapid rise of new trading systems often said to characterize the secularized Postclassic.

Taking a last look at Altun Ha, I want to revisit my earlier point that the term *city* is a general term that includes many types of settlement. Cities, like states, wax and wane over time (Marcus 1992a; Marcus and Feinman 1998). Although Altun Ha

certainly participated in trade—and, no doubt, hosted regular markets—the timing, significance, and contents of Altun Ha's markets may not have been the same as those that fueled Chau Hiix and Lamanai. Exchange at Altun Ha may have looked more like the elite-controlled deployment of status goods than what was hawked to all comers at Chau Hiix; Lamanai had a more balanced combination of market styles and merchant types. But I hypothesize that elites at Altun Ha probably had more control of production, deciding what should be planted, and when, from afar. Such strategies are expensive, unstable, and dangerously disengaged from the micro-environmental factors that smallholders exploit. Elite landowners lack the local knowledge and the investment required for sustainability, and their estates easily fall victim to greed, mismanagement, and collapse.

Considering the broader issues addressed in this book about the nature of early cities and where they come from, it seems important to try to discern whether one city along the New River was an overarching political power stimulating, cajoling, and sometimes controlling the conurbation. Of course, there may have been no political center, with each site tied to the others in shifting ways fueled by complementary roles and specialties. But the very different sizes and trajectories of the three, combined with the data and speculations presented here, do suggest some interesting possibilities.

If Lamanai, by all measures the largest of the three cities, was the Classic period political apex, why was Altun Ha, its middle-range subordinate center, abandoned? Quite a few other cities, including some that were definitely not "middle range," such as Tikal, also were depopulated. Why were Altun Ha's elite tombs robbed and Lamanai and Chau Hiix's left intact?

If Altun Ha was the political center of a multi-city state, why would a city controlling the agricultural output of some of the most productive farmers in the Maya world change so radically while its subordinate cities kept going on just as before, giving little appearance of having escaped a political or economic yoke? The reason is that the producers at Altun Ha were land poor because of their less intensive and less sustainable strategies and their lack of personal investment in the land. Their relationship with Chau Hiix and Lamanai was partly political, partly pomp and circumstance choreographed by nonresident elites with an eye on profits and little local investment. All Maya agriculture was intensive by the Classic period. But the production on wealthy estates was less efficient and less productive than smallholding, and estates were probably constantly trying to expand. Netting (1993) mentions that the Ibo, extensive agriculturalists living near the smallholder Kofyar, are constantly trying to move in on Kofyar land. Wealthy landowners, especially under conditions of political stress, would be more likely to make decisions about land use with short-term benefits that were ultimately unsustainable. Altun Ha probably did have access to produce from Chau Hiix and Altun Ha but did not control production and only benefited from some control of distribution to and from the central Petén via less reliable ocean routes. Bulk trade in mass-produced goods or food was relatively limited by Altun Ha's landlocked locus. These distribution channels were dependent on Petén connections, and

when these declined, Lamanai easily stepped in to incorporate the distribution system engineered by Altun Ha into its already healthy mercantile economy.

Many burials at Chau Hiix contain extra bones that show from their condition that human bones were recovered and reburied with people more recently dead (Della Cook, personal communication, 1996). Tomb 1, an Early Classic tomb built into the base of the Structure 1 staircase (figure 13.5), contained a bundle of bones from at least twelve individuals that was obviously a secondary burial (Della Cook, personal communication, 2005). The tomb was reopened, and the bundle was substituted for the bones of the left leg of the primary inhumation. In the Terminal Classic and Early Postclassic, Structure 2, judged to be an elite residence because of its size and location immediately south of Structure 1, Chau Hiix's largest monument, became a necropolis, despite the fact that it continued to be used by the living, as evidenced by the perpetual reconstruction of its floor above the dead. In all, at least 70 individuals were buried in Structure 2 in family clusters (Wrobel 2004); isotope analysis of their bones indicates that they were not foreigners (Metcalfe 2005). This was a new practice at Chau Hiix, not known from earlier periods, when interments were isolated; at most, three or four people were buried over time in house floors. McAnany (1995) and others have argued that the Maya were ancestor worshippers, but I would add to this the importance of "place" to smallholders, whose strategy hinges on their ownership of land. Ancestral burials in many cultures both signify and establish land tenure.

Perhaps the disturbance of elite tombs at Altun Ha was not so much desecration as an indication of a change in land ownership. The failure of wealthy estates would lead to a withdrawal of retainers and possibly a change in the system of land tenure; smallholders do readily move into newly available land (Stone et al. 1990). Perhaps new residents eradicated evidence of former owners, or maybe the elite moved their dead to join family members where land tenure was still secured by perpetual residence. We cannot guess where they were moved, but if the political economy of the conurbation was secured by the residence of representatives from Chau Hiix and Lamanai at Altun Ha, perhaps some of the burials, and secondary burials that appear in Structure 2 during the Terminal and Early Postclassic, were simply people returning home. With this in mind, it might one day be possible to find the reburial places of the elite of Altun Ha.

To a certain extent, many of our constructions of ancient cities come out of our personal folk models of human behavior. Are people always unwilling to produce more than they need? Are they basically rational or irrational, normally social, selfish, or moral, inherently gullible or suspicious, predictably hierarchical or democratic? On the premise that such characteristics ought to be the subject of research questions instead of the assumptions that underlie them, Richard Wilk argues that people's motives and choices are never very clear and that these define types of behavior, not types of people (Wilk 1996:150). Whatever else we may conclude about urban life, I feel confident that new suites of motives and behaviors were brought into more intense proximity, which no doubt created alliances and feuds, synergy and disintegration,

elitism and democracy, and a never-ending conversation about what it means to be urban, such as the one we partake of here.

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