
SPECIAL SECTION: CONTEMPORARY ARCHAEOLOGY IN YUCATAN

INTRODUCTION

This issue's Special Section reflects the theoretical perspectives and methodologies in use within the field of Maya archaeology as practiced currently in the northern lowlands of Yucatan, Mexico. These articles contribute to a conversation that began with the "Special Section: Recent Chronological Research in Northern Yucatan" in *Ancient Mesoamerica* vol. 9, no. 1 (1998). In a region where chronological questions have always taken center stage, the 1998 articles provided new primary data upon which to build a regional framework for the entire span of ancient northern Lowland Maya history. In the introduction to that collection of papers (Arden and Fowler 1998) we remarked on the fact that 65 years after the conclusion of the Carnegie Institution of Washington flagship project at Chichen Itza, with its specific culture-historical focus, we still lacked a comprehensive historical understanding of the great pre-Columbian city that dominated the peninsula from the Late Classic into the Postclassic period. Today, we have considerably more clarity on ceramic sequences and their relationships in Yucatan (Andrews et al. 2003; García Moll and Cobos 2009: 53–65), and investigations have moved beyond purely chronological concerns to examine issues of the built environment, rural-urban relationships, economic variability, and domestic production. Innovative materials analyses are also noteworthy.

This Special Section presents three different approaches to the construction of ancient Maya history in northern Yucatan. The first approach embraces a macroscopic and panoramic perspective of the cultural landscape that includes the study of settlement patterns during different periods. Settlement pattern studies in northern Yucatan are part of a rich tradition dating back to the mid-twentieth century, but the theoretical models employed by recent studies distinguish them from earlier periods. Current research considers the manner in which the landscape reflects social and political tensions that arose between different ancient communities. The rich architectural tradition of Yucatan is a key component for the exploration of social and political strategies and interactions between groups. This approach is represented well in the work of Glover and Hutson et al., who place special emphasis on the exploration of intercommunity relationships as derived from social interactions with the constructed environment.

The interaction between the rural world and the urban one, as well as the limitations and advantages both spheres offered the communities studied by **Jeffrey B. Glover**, allow him to reconstruct a regional settlement pattern but also to explore political relations among Preclassic communities of the northeastern peninsula. This

investigation contributes to a deeper understanding of an under-explored region; it provides both a foundation for future studies and a wealth of comparative material with which to explore convergences and divergences with other regions of Yucatan. The use of the post-structuralist and practice models in conjunction with the study of the built environment produces an important and innovative approach to settlement pattern analysis.

In another novel approach to a long-standing concern of archaeology, **Scott R. Hutson, Aline Magnoni, and Travis W. Stanton** apply structuration theory and semiotics to the study of social practices by identifying changes in the constructed environment of different communities. The study of the landscape as a text to be deconstructed by semiotic analysis allows the determination of material contingencies and their repercussions carried out in constructed spaces. By applying these models, the investigators recognize that the social practices of all periods can be characterized as uncertain or unstable. Such an assertion stands in contrast to more traditional approaches that imply that the physicality of material culture is concrete and therefore stable by its sheer materiality. They argue that architectural elements and the landscape coalesce into one another in the same way that social relationships integrate or disintegrate based on everyday practices. The use of *sacbeob*, the network of roads that tie communities together, serves as a means to explore the production and reproduction of social systems. These concerns transcend the analysis of the function of cultural manifestations such as *sacbeob*, and they turn their attention to the aspects of meaning and symbolism that accompany the construction of these specific cultural manifestations.

The second approach represented in the Special Section is an intermediate level of analysis that seeks to define the relationship of the local to the regional. By combining the analysis of material culture recovered through controlled, systematic excavation with settlement studies, these researchers explore local issues at different sites throughout the peninsula. The work of Magnoni and colleagues and that of Manahan and colleagues constitute examples of the use of detailed material culture studies to address the reconstruction of local and regional processes.

Aline Magnoni, Scott R. Hutson, and Bruce H. Dahlin illustrate how the settlement pattern of the city of Chunchucmil during the Middle Classic period demonstrates irregularities with respect to other comparable sites. The excavation of multiple residential areas offers the authors an opportunity to explore material aspects of the constructed social space that affected social practices as

well as the individual and collective identity of the city's inhabitants. The identification of specific activities within constructed spaces permits the characterization of urban growth at Chunchucmil. This paper is a systematic study of the region's economic variability and the importance of indirectly identifying such practices as commerce, a crucial aspect of the development and growth of northern lowland communities in Yucatan during the Classic period.

T. Kam Manahan, Traci Ardren, and Alejandra Alonso Olvera explore the relevance of a secondary site located on the northern plains of the peninsula and its interaction with Chichen Itza during the Late to Terminal Classic period. Research at Xuenkal presents an opportunity to understand the economic, social, and political relationships that facilitated the growth of a metropolis like Chichen Itza. They argue for the importance of domestic production and its integration into a regional political economy. Through the lens of Xuenkal, we can better understand the development of communities that, before the Terminal Classic period, were restricted in their growth but might have enjoyed greater political autonomy.

The final group of articles reflects the third research approach used throughout the peninsula today. These articles present a focused analysis of key materials, such as ceramics, faunal remains, and soil chemistry. Yucatan is well-known for its site-specific ceramic typologies established in the early twentieth century, but it has seen relatively fewer studies of individual artifact classes or ceramic syntheses. The articles included in this section not only add depth to our understanding of material patterns in individual artifact classes, but they also facilitate the further refinement or revision of the chronology of northern Yucatan. The papers by; Anderson and colleagues, Pérez de Heredia Puente; Ceballos Gallareta and Robles Castellanos; Hernández Álvarez and Peniche May; and Götz reflect this development of analytical focus.

David S. Anderson, Daniel A. Bair, and Richard E. Terry present the analysis of microscopic archaeological remains that facilitate the identification of elusive economic activities. They employ the study of phosphorous and trace metals in soils to identify market areas and their importance in early settled life at Xtobo, a Middle Preclassic site in the northwestern part of the peninsula. Sophisticated geochemical techniques allow for a more precise identification of cultural practices that remain almost invisible in the archaeological record. Anderson and colleagues show that market activities were connected with other important activities such as craft production, food preparation, ritual practices, and food disposal, making exchange spaces more dynamic than expected.

REFERENCES

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Eduardo J. Pérez de Heredia Puente and Teresa Ceballos Gallareta and Fernando Robles Castellanos provide exhaustive reexamination and revision of the ceramic chronology of the region. These reconsiderations are based on newly excavated materials and call into question earlier models proposed more than forty years ago. They also represent excellent examples of the types of analysis and evaluation of new information that can be produced through the careful combination of data from both systematic excavation as well as salvage projects carried out in recent times. The examination of a larger corpus of material with a fresh perspective permits these scholars to refine ceramic phases that have caused controversy at regional and local levels in Yucatan.

Finally, the contributions of **Christopher M. Götz** and that of **Héctor Hernández Álvarez and Nancy Peniche May** present synthetic studies of specific artifact classes that have been long overlooked in programs of research in Yucatan. Hunting, distribution, and consumption of animal protein (reflected in faunal remains) and textile production (demonstrated by the presence of spindle whorls) were vital components of Maya economic systems throughout the Classic period and beyond, but these articles present some of the first archaeological data on these topics to be organized systematically. Both articles facilitate the identification of patterns and trends of economic specialization at the regional level.

The archaeology of Yucatan has long been dominated by research on a few large sites and the tourism they inspire. This impression remains true to a degree, but changes are occurring rapidly. The last 25 years have seen the rapid expansion in Yucatan of not only tourism, but also graduate training in archaeology and anthropology, international congresses of Maya scholars, Maya revitalization programs at the state and regional level, and a host of issues related to the rapid development of the peninsula. Each of these factors has had an impact on how archaeological research is conducted. These papers demonstrate how research has matured and diversified in the past 15 years. It is our hope that the investigations presented here will continue to advance the understanding of the rich archaeological record of Yucatan, in all of its forms.

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