
23 ***LIFE AT THE CROSSROADS: NEW DATA FROM PUSILHA, BELIZE***

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Recent excavations at the site of Pusilha, Belize have revealed a diverse material culture assemblage that raises intriguing questions concerning the occupational history and development of the Southern Belize sub region, located in the southeastern periphery of the Maya lowlands. Here, we describe significant findings from investigations conducted in 2004, as well as the major components of a provisional ceramic typology. The majority of ceramic material excavated so far date to the Late Classic period and reveal clear links to contemporary complexes from various parts of the Maya area, as well as to non-Maya regions in Honduras.

The major focus of the Pusilha Archaeological Project is to investigate patterns of sociopolitical and economic interaction with southeastern Mesoamerica during the history of the polity, and to determine the effects of shifting connections on local domestic and elite economy. Previous research and our own investigations at Pusilha have yielded an extensive corpus of hieroglyphic inscriptions (Braswell et al. 2004), site plan and architectural data, and a material culture inventory consisting of both locally produced and imported items. Our research goals necessitate an understanding of the degree and kind of relationships that existed between Pusilha and other sites in southern Belize. We hope that this will allow us not only to understand the development of the polity within a regional context, but also to identify broader trends in the history of the Maya lowlands and the southeastern periphery of Mesoamerica (Figure 1).

Richard Leventhal's (1990) earlier research at sites in Toledo District, including Pusilha, led him to define southern Belize as a distinct region of the Maya lowlands. For the most part, his definition was based on three architectural features: ballcourts located in walled enclosures, a lack of corbel-vaulted structures, and the extensive

use of natural topography in the built environment. A fourth important characteristic of the southern Belize zone is erroneous or eccentric lunar information recorded in hieroglyphic inscriptions. Recently discovered sites in nearby San Luis Peten, Guatemala, also share these characteristics, suggesting that the southern Belize zone may extend to the upper reaches of the Rio Cancuen. In other words, Leventhal's archaeological region spans an important connection between the Caribbean Sea and the Rio Pasion – and ultimately, Rio Usumacinta – watersheds. The location of Pusilha at the juncture of the Poite and Pusilha rivers, therefore, placed it in a strategic position controlling trade across an important east-west trade route linking the Caribbean to the southern and central Maya lowlands.

Pusilha also may have served as an important node on a north-south trade route, articulating trade between the lowlands and the southeast periphery. The upper Mopan region is located just 20 km north of the upper Pusilha River, therefore sites in the eastern Peten and western Belize may have been connected to Quirigua, Copan, and non-Maya Honduras via Pusilha in southern Belize. Strong ceramic evidence for exchange between these regions –in

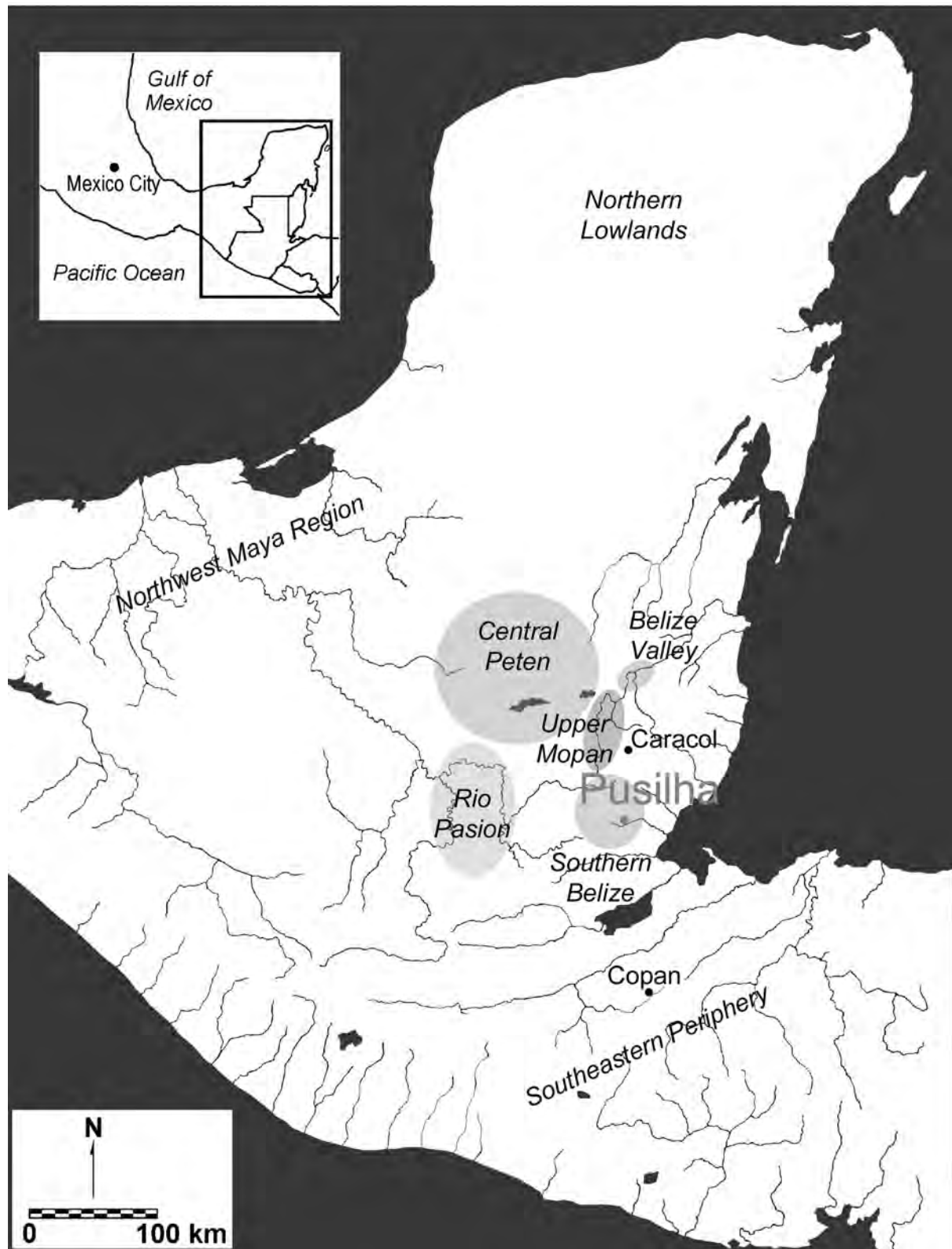


Figure 1. The location of Pusilha, the Southern Belize Region, and other regions of the Maya lowlands.

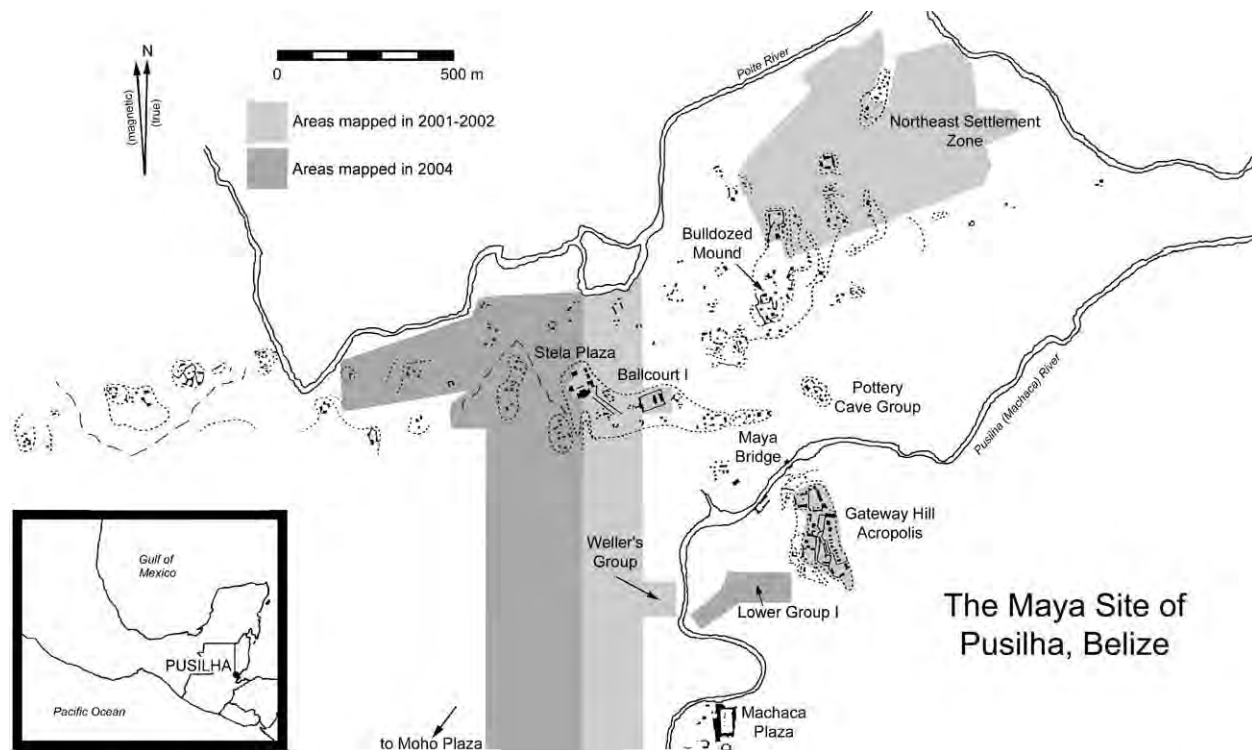


Figure 2. The Maya site of Pusilha (after Leventhal 1990:Figure 8).

particular between northern and western Belize and the southeastern periphery— has been known for some time. The so-called Quetzal Vase, for example, which was found in a royal tomb at Copan, has been stylistically and chemically sourced to Altun Ha (Reents-Budet 1994). Red-slipped bowls of Belize Red types have been found not only at Quirigua, but also at sites in the Naco and Ulua valleys of western Honduras (e.g., Sheptak 1987). Similarly, “marble” (actually alabaster) vessels from the Ulua Valley have been recovered at a number of sites in the Maya lowlands, including Uaxactun, Altun Ha, and Xunantunich (Sheptak 1987). Thus, active exchange between the eastern Maya lowlands and non-Maya regions of Honduras occurred during the Late Classic period. The intermediate location of Pusilha suggests that this important polity may have linked the eastern Maya lowlands with western Honduras and other parts of the southeastern

Mesoamerican periphery. We seek a more comprehensive understanding of the role of Pusilha, and indeed of the entire southern Belize region, in this interaction. We also are studying the chronology and effects of this exchange on local political and economic conditions.

Although we have only conducted two field-seasons of excavations and a third of survey at Pusilha, a number of patterns informing these questions have begun to emerge. We begin our report here with a brief description of some of the work carried out during the 2004 season at Pusilha, and conclude with a discussion of our analyses of ceramics recovered to date.

2004 Field Season

During the first two field seasons of investigations at Pusilha, we mapped significant portions of the site—including the Gateway Hill Acropolis, the Moho Plaza with its hieroglyphic stair, the Stela Plaza-

Ballcourt I group, and several large settlement zones (Figure 2). In 2002, we also conducted a test-pitting program, and excavated and consolidated a partially bulldozed mound. Most importantly, Christian Prager, Co-Director and Project Epigrapher, analyzed the extensive hieroglyphic corpus of Pusilha and reconstructed much of the dynastic history of the site (Braswell et al. 2004; Prager 2002). To date, 11 rulers of Pusilha and 10 other related individuals have been identified. Seventeen more people, who are not yet chronologically embedded in the history of Pusilha, also have been identified. At least eight warfare events have been noted. The only other site in Belize for which we have a comparably rich hieroglyphic history is Caracol.

In 2004, we continued opportunistic mapping of a 1-km² area cleared and burned for *milpa* farming. We also excavated two range structures at the south end of the Gateway Hill Acropolis (Figure 3), as well as two additional structures in a large group 150 m west and 55 m below the acropolis. A salvage pit was placed on a third structure in this lower group. During the course of investigations, we excavated nine burials dating to the 7th to early 9th centuries A.D. Burial furniture from one elaborate crypt dating to the second half of the Late Classic period contained at least one complete pyrite mirror, hematite sequins, four polychrome vessels, shell ornaments, and two peculiar artifacts including a slate “wrench” (Figure 4). The placement of bones in this crypt suggest that it was a secondary burial. Analyses of all these artifacts, as well as of the many whole and partial ceramic vessels, lithic tools, shell ornaments, human remains, and numerous figurines and figurine molds recovered in 2004 have just begun and will be discussed at future Belize Archaeology Symposia.

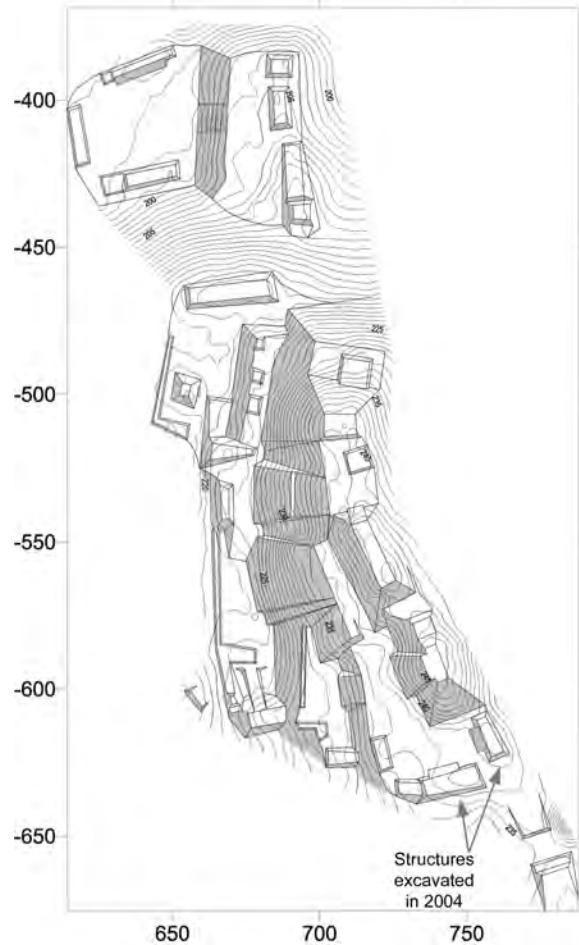


Figure 3. Gateway Hill Acropolis, Pusilha, showing two structures excavated in 2004.

Ceramic Analysis

Hieroglyphic inscriptions from Pusilha suggest that the site was occupied by the end of the Early Classic period; the earliest historical (rather than retrospectively mythological) inscription refers to events in A.D. 570. Ceramics recovered from previous explorations of several cave sites in the vicinity of Pusilha include Early Classic markers, such as basal-flanged polychrome bowls, as well as even earlier “shoe pots.” Nevertheless, the ceramic material we have recovered, from architectural contexts at Pusilha all dates to the Late Classic and Postclassic periods. The following discussion of the ceramics of Pusilha is

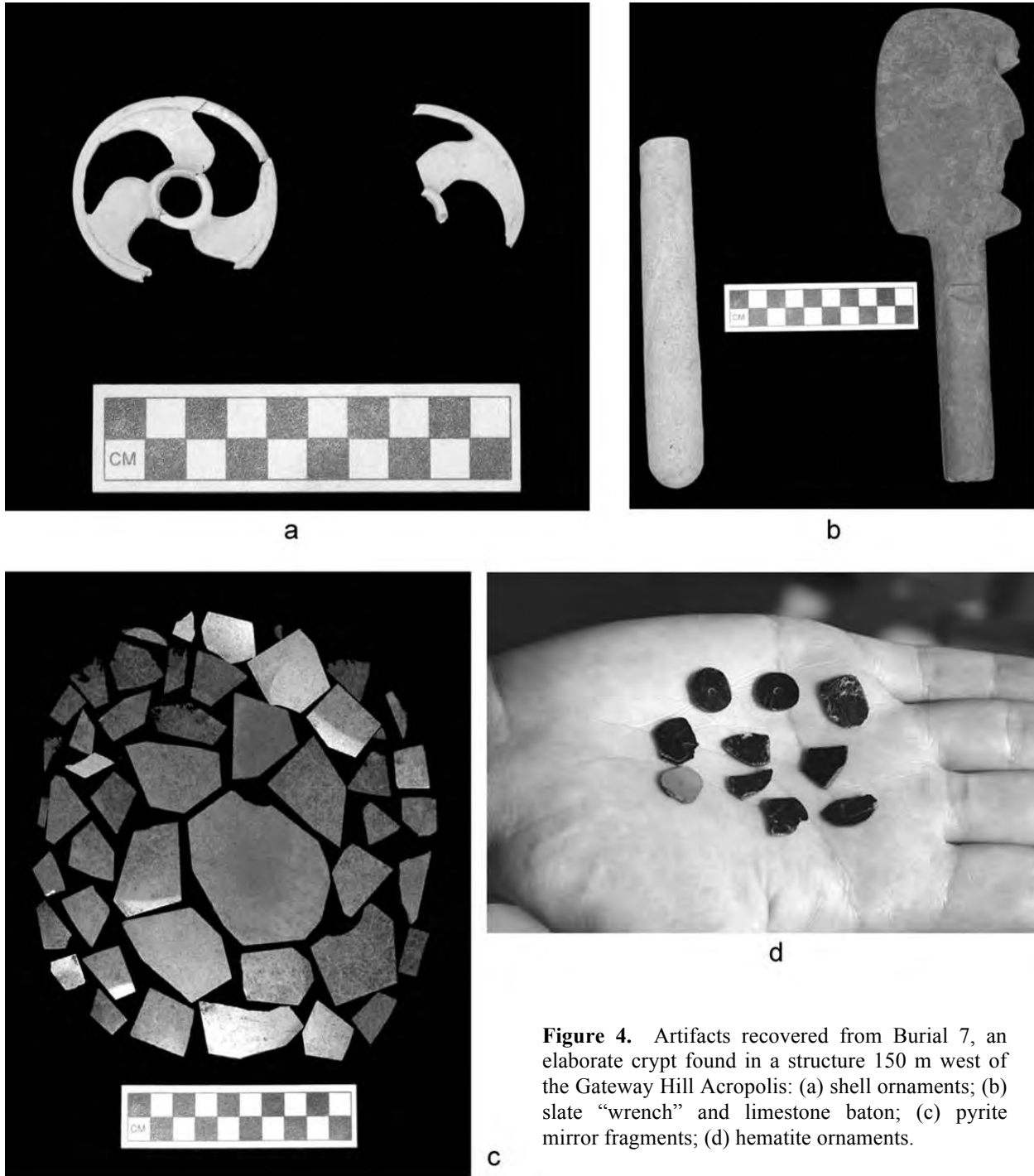


Figure 4. Artifacts recovered from Burial 7, an elaborate crypt found in a structure 150 m west of the Gateway Hill Acropolis: (a) shell ornaments; (b) slate “wrench” and limestone baton; (c) pyrite mirror fragments; (d) hematite ornaments.

limited to the Late Classic period, c. A.D. 600 to shortly after A.D. 800.

The Late Classic assemblage from Pusilha includes elements common throughout most of the Maya lowlands.

Such components include: (1) unslipped striated jars, some of which are decorated with appliquéd elements (Figure 5); (2) modeled and appliquéd censers; (3) both plain and decorated polished black wares



Figure 5. Striated jars from Pusilha.

(Figure 6); and (4) a wide assortment of orange-slipped and cream-slipped polychrome vessels in a variety of forms including bowls, cylinders, and shallow dishes or plates (Figure 7). Also present are large red-slipped bowls and red-slipped jars, some of which are decorated with impressed designs along the shoulder (Figure 8).

These same general categories of vessels figure prominently in the ceramic assemblage from the neighboring southern Belize site of Lubaantun, although specific vessel forms differ markedly between the two sites (see Hammond [1975] for a full description of ceramics from Lubaantun). This pattern may reflect separate sub-regional systems of ceramic production and distribution associated with each site or temporal differences in their periods of occupation. Nevertheless, it is clear that the ceramics from Pusilha and Lubaantun share

many features in common, including the presence of coarse-pasted, short-necked jars of the Puluacax Unslipped type (Figure 9) that appear to be distinctive to southern Belize. Another commonality is the abundance of Late Classic figurines found at both Pusilha and Lubaantun, a pattern also seen in the Upper Pasion region to the west, including the site of Cancuen.

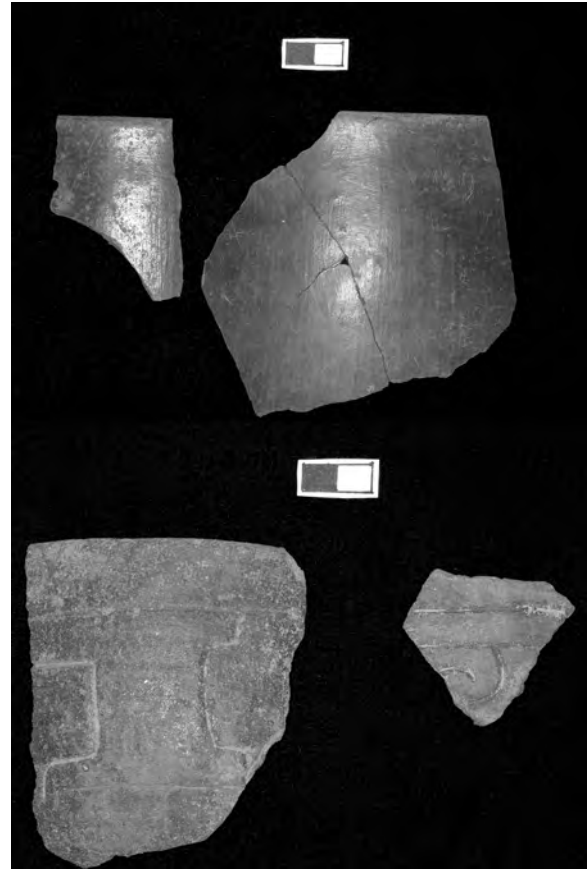


Figure 6. Polished black ceramics from Pusilha.

More significant is the pattern of interregional ceramic affiliation reflected in the assemblages from both sites. In terms of type and modal frequencies, the Late Classic assemblage from southern Belize has more in common with contemporary assemblages from the Pasion region and, to a certain extent, with northern Peten, than with that of the Belize Valley. The particularly close relation with sites in the central and southern

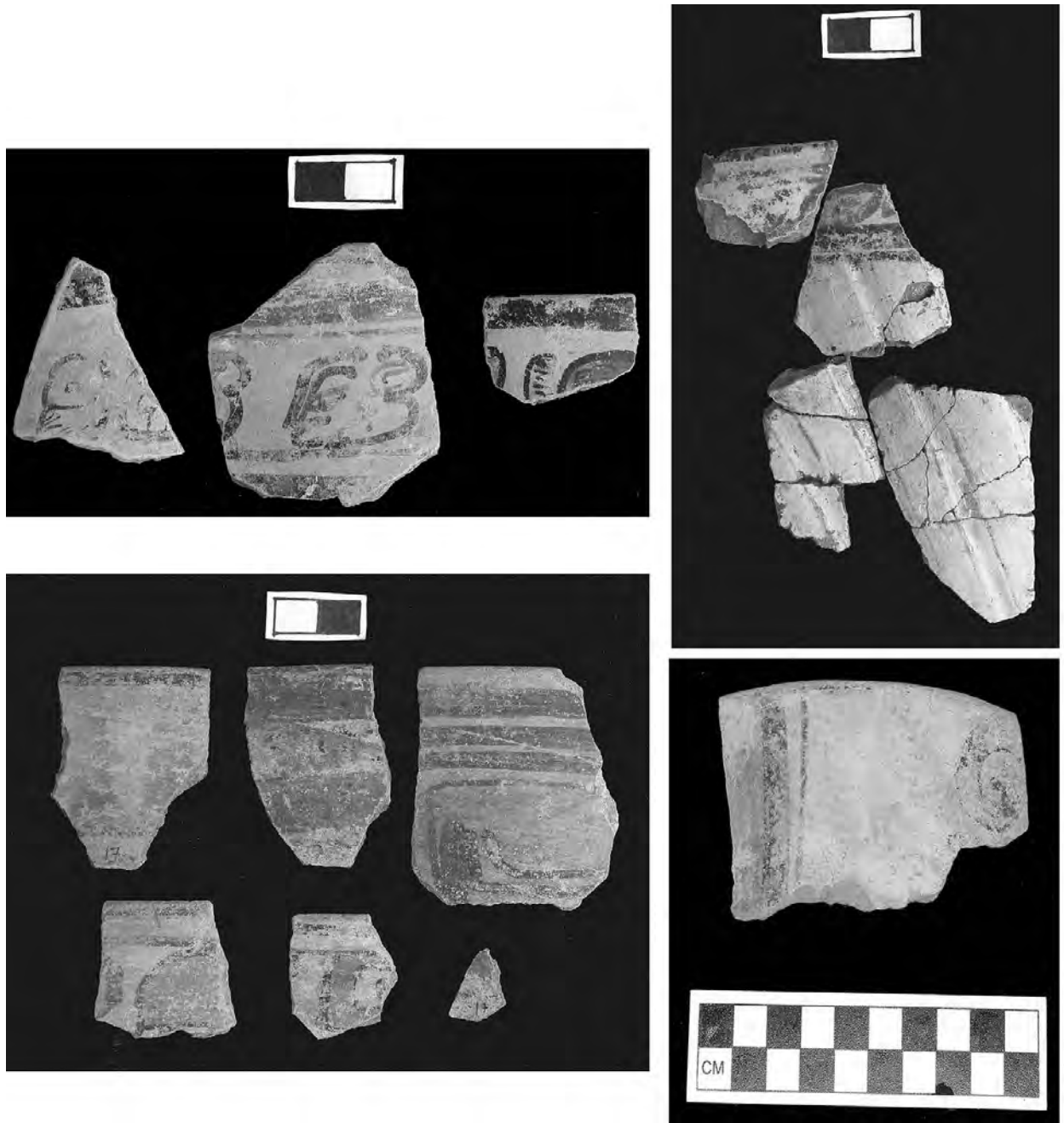


Figure 7. Orange- and cream-slipped polychromes from Pusilha.

Maya lowlands, rather than with the Belize Valley, is not surprising given the ease of east-west riverine transport and the difficult topography of the Maya Mountains.

Features of the southern Belize assemblage shared with lowland regions to the west include red-slipped jars, especially

those with impressed and stamped designs. Such jars are common in the upper and lower Pasion, the Dolores Valley, and northern Peten. Such vessels are rare or absent in the Belize Valley, although they do appear at sites just to the north of the Maya Mountains, including various caves in the



Figure 8. Red-slipped bowls and jars from Pusilha.

Chiquibul region (Hammond 1975:305) and at Caracol (Chase 1994:174).

In addition to these widely shared types and modes, certain components of the Pusilha assemblage have a more circumscribed distribution. Such elements include *comales* (large, shallow,

griddle-like vessels), which are common at Pusilha and in the Upper Pasión and the Dolores Valley regions to the west (Figure 10; Bill 2001; Juan Pedro Laporte, pers. comm. 2000). Thus, although they are apparently absent from Lubaantun, *comales* appear to be a functional class of vessels



Figure 9. Puluacax Unslipped jars from Pusuilha.

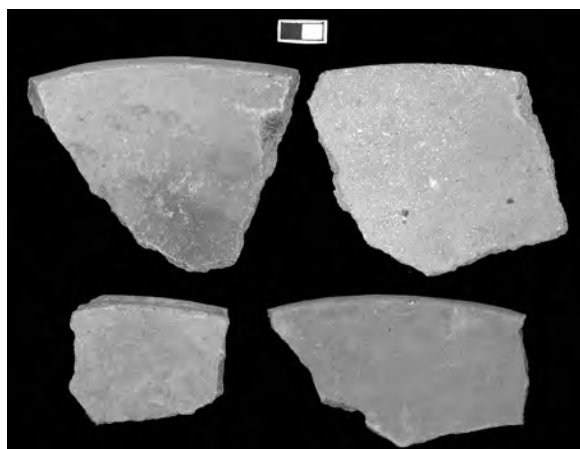


Figure 10. *Comales* from Pusuilha.

characteristic of utilitarian traditions in the southeastern lowland region.

Also noteworthy at Pusuilha are certain design elements on polychrome bowls that appear to be extremely rare elsewhere in the Maya lowlands but are very common in various polychrome traditions of the southeastern Mesoamerican periphery. These include the “twist-and-bud” pattern, which consists of undulating lines with small oval elements attached to them (Figure 11). This common design element at Pusuilha also occurs on certain polychromes from eastern El Salvador and other parts of the southeast periphery (Andrews 1976). Additional common motifs on polychromes from Pusuilha include small seated birds and seated monkeys. Seated birds are a frequent decorative element on bichrome and

polychrome vessels from western Honduras and other parts of the southeast periphery. Seated monkeys also occur on incised vessels from Pusuilha and other parts of the lowlands, including the Pasion River region, and monkeys are also a common motif on polychromes from Altun Ha.

Although polychrome vessels with these particular motifs are not reported from Lubaantun, it is significant that some of these same elements (including monkeys and birds) are typical of the stamp designs on the impressed red-slipped jars from that nearby site, and that these motifs do not occur on the stamped jars from other parts of the lowlands.



Figure 11. Polychrome sherds with the “twist-and-bud” motif from Pusuilha.

To date, we have not recovered any examples of Copador Polychrome, which is a distinctive southeastern periphery type characteristic of the Late Classic period in Copan and western El Salvador, and occurs only as an extremely rare import outside of those zones. Nevertheless, recent chemical

analyses of Copador Polychrome sherds collected at Pusilha by the British Museum Expedition to British Honduras in the late 1920s reveal that about half were manufactured in the Copan region (Bishop and Beaudry 1994; Bishop et al. 1986). These sherds all come from a large deposit at Pottery Cave, a context that we have re-excavated and now confidently date to near the beginning of the Late Classic period. We note, however, that none of the pieces illustrated by Thomas A. Joyce (1929) appear to be typical of Copador Polychrome that we have seen from Copan or western El Salvador, and there is some question regarding the actual provenance of Pusilha ceramics now curated at the British Museum (see Hammond 1975).

Conclusions

The ceramic inventory of Pusilha, including both elite and utilitarian wares, demonstrates significant connections with a number of different regions both within and beyond the Maya area. More work is needed to clarify the Late Classic assemblage from Pusilha and to better identify chronological differences in type and modal frequencies associated with earlier and later facets of Late Classic activity. Already, however, there exist correlations between different sets of data at the site that together suggest certain patterns in Pusilha's regional and inter-regional affiliations during the Late Classic Period.

As reported at the 2003 Belize Archaeology Symposium, Christian Prager's work on the hieroglyphic inscriptions of Pusilha demonstrates ties with a number of different regions, including the Petexbatun and Río Pasión zones, as well as more ambiguous links with Copan and Quirigua in the southeastern periphery of the Maya area (Braswell et al. 2004). Links to these same regions are evident in certain features of the Late Classic ceramic assemblage from

Pusilha, as well as in the iconographic or material culture inventory of other centers in southern Belize.

There is some evidence to suggest, however, that Pusilha external affiliations may have shifted during the Classic period. Pasion-related types appear throughout the 7th and 8th centuries, but it is interesting to note that the possible Copador Polychromes from Pottery Cave all come from a context that is relatively early in the occupation of the site. At about this same time -- the mid-7th century -- iconographic conventions and two names that appear in the hieroglyphic texts suggest that Pusilha had important connections with Copan. It also is interesting that the Copan tomb containing the Quetzal Vase imported from Altun Ha dates to about this time (Bill 1997).

By the mid-8th century, new connections were forged with other regions. Perhaps this later period of occupation at the site was typified by greater economic and political independence at Pusilha, as well as by closer affiliations with other southern Belize centers. The most direct connections to the ceramics from Lubaantun, for example, are seen at the very end of the Late Classic. The distinctive Puluacax Unslipped type, which appears to have had a longer history at Lubaantun, is entirely restricted to surface contexts at Pusilha.

Our closest --and truly, the only-- direct ceramic connection to the Belize Valley is imported Belize Red pottery. Belize Red also appears only at the very end of Classic occupation of the site, which we tentatively date to c. A.D. 770 – 830. With the exception of a whole vessel recovered from a late burial (Figure 12), Belize Red sherds are found exclusively in surface contexts at Pusilha. Hammond's (1975) analysis similarly indicates a late occurrence for Belize Red pottery recovered at Lubaantun. Thus, during the last decades of the Classic period, the southern Belize

region became economically linked to the Belize Valley for the first time in its history.



Figure 12. Belize Red plate recovered from Burial 3, Gateway Hill Acropolis.

Obsidian procurement data also suggest a reorganization of interregional exchange links near the end of the Classic period. During the 7th and 8th centuries, virtually all obsidian consumed at the site came from the El Chayal, Guatemala, source: a pattern linking Pusilha to most sites in the Maya lowlands. By the early 9th century, however, more obsidian from Ixtepeque – and even some from Pachuca, Hidalgo, and Zaragoza, Puebla – was traded to the site. As sites in the central and southern lowlands suffered demographic decline, remaining populations broadened their economic ties, shifted their trade links, and obtained obsidian from new sources. Braswell, among others, has noted a similar pattern at Xunantunich in the Belize Valley and even further west in the Peten Lakes region particularly during the 9th century. Exotic Mexican obsidian appeared at Pusilha for the first time during the Terminal Classic period, as did Fine Orange from the northwestern Maya area. Both Pachuca and

Zaragoza obsidian began to enter that region in quantity at the very end of the Late Classic period, so perhaps Fine Orange and Mexican obsidian were brought together to Pusilha from the Gulf Coast.

Thus, although our analyses of the data from Pusilha have only just begun, we have already observed significant ties with certain regions during specific periods of time. Further investigation of these ties will enhance our understanding of trade connections within and beyond the Maya lowlands during the Late Classic and Terminal Classic periods. Ongoing analysis of the ceramics and other artifacts from Pusilha is aimed at determining the nature and timing of Pusilha's regional and interregional connections – with the Pasion zone, the southeast periphery, and lastly the Belize Valley – both to evaluate their role in the developmental trajectory of the site itself and to examine the effects of sociopolitical change on interaction networks in the Maya area.

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