

Teotihuacan and Oxkintok: New Perspectives from Yucatán

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Since the early twentieth century, questions of interaction and the spread of Teotihuacan-related features in the Maya area have generated many studies that use a variety of methodologies and adopt very different points of view (e.g., Berlo 1984, 1989; Coggins 1975; Hellmuth 1975; Kidder et al. 1946; Laporte 1989; Linné 1942; Miller 1983; Parsons 1967–1969; Pasztory 1978b; Sanders and Michels 1977; Sanders and Price 1968; Santley 1989; Seler 1976[1915]; von Winning 1987). Analysis of these works reveals several problems that are as much epistemological as they are empirical (Varela Torrecilla 1998:13–25).

In the case of the northern Maya lowlands, a chronological and cultural gap can be added to these problems. The cultural sequences of this region until recently have included very little information about the periods before the Late Classic and the Puuc phenomenon (Andrews 1965; Andrews 1986; Andrews and Andrews 1980; Ball 1978; Brainerd 1958; Pollock 1980; Smith 1971). Excavations of the Misión Arqueológica de España en México (MAEM) at Oxkintok (Figure 1.1), one of the major sites of northwest Yucatán, have generated data (derived from ceramics, architecture, burials, and other materials and contexts) that clarify the chronology of the Proto-Puuc architectural style and allow the definition of the Oxkintok Regional ceramic phase (Figure 1.2), both of which date to the sixth century A.D.

To date, no satisfactory explanation has been proposed for interaction between the Maya and Teotihuacan. In this chapter, we widen the discussion with an evaluation of both the epistemological framework and the empirical data from the northern lowlands. Looking at the archaeological record we have from Oxkintok and northwest Yucatán, one can find no evidence of either political/economic domination or colonization by Teotihuacan. Instead, the data suggest that the *in situ* transition to a more complex society was associated with processes of cultural adoption, adaptation, and innovation. Although it still is difficult to identify the degree to which interaction and transformation took place, we suggest that these processes were related

to participation in a pan-Mesoamerican interaction network and to changes in the sociopolitical and commercial relationship between the southern and northern Maya areas (Ball 1977b:182-183).

Epistemological Framework: Teotihuacan, the Maya, and the "Middle Classic Horizon"

Several explanations of interaction between the Maya lowlands and central Mexico are deeply rooted in the hypothesis of a Teotihuacan "empire" whose cultural traits spread because of: (1) economic processes, including the long-distance exchange of both basic subsistence and exotic goods; or (2) the political and military ambitions of priestly soldiers or militant *pochteca*. In our opinion, the supposedly dominant role played by Teotihuacan in Mesoamerica has served as a starting point for scenarios that assume that these cultural traits were "exported" from Teotihuacan. Such narratives do not take into account weaknesses in Teotihuacan's relative chronology and its dependence on temporal data and sequences from Maya sites (Millon 1967, 1968: III-III2; cf. R. Millon 1973:61). Moreover, they do not attempt to date precisely the appearance of each central Mexican trait in the Maya area. In order to understand the origin and chronology of each feature, its exact temporal occurrence and context both at Teotihuacan and in other parts of Mesoamerica must be known. Recent results and closer readings of empirical evidence show that scant archaeological data all too often have been uncritically accommodated to diffusionist hypotheses (Clark 1986; Kidder et al. 1946:246).

It should also be noted that the "Middle Classic Horizon," whose underlying hypothesis is the development and expansion of a Teotihuacan "empire" throughout Mesoamerica, now is generally discredited. Nonetheless, this concept served for a time as a reference model (e.g., Pasztory 1978b; Wolf 1976). As Arthur A. Demarest and Antonia Foias (1993) point out, the lack of chronological alignment of "central Mexican" traits at different sites is the most disturbing aspect of evidence for interaction with Teotihuacan. "Without such an alignment, what meaning does the 'horizon' concept have?" (Demarest and Foias 1993:170).

One of us has addressed this question before (Varela Torrecilla 1998), and we stress again that there is confusion regarding the chronological and cultural meaning of the term *horizon*. The same "Middle Classic Horizon" markers (e.g., green obsidian, Thin Orange ware, and specific iconographic and architectural elements) are commonly used both for *defining* and for *dating* interaction. For example, green obsidian found at Maya sites has often

been taken as evidence for interaction with Teotihuacan, and hence is dated to the "Middle Classic." Nevertheless, Hattula Moholy-Nagy (1999a) and others have demonstrated that green obsidian was consumed during the Preclassic, Classic, and Postclassic periods. Moreover, comparatively few scholars have attempted to assess changes in the characteristics of these markers through time. Although the Maya built *talud-tablero* structures from the Terminal Preclassic through the Late Classic period, the style did not remain static (see Chapter 7). The earliest examples at Tikal employ framed *tableros* that pass only part way around a structure. Framed *tableros* became more common during the Early Classic period, as did the combination of *tableros* with typically Maya apron moldings. Late Classic *talud-tablero* structures sometimes were built with the *atadura* (cinch) form from Veracruz.

Thus, the common view of the "Middle Classic Horizon" presupposes a diffusion or migration mechanism that: (1) ignores the internal dynamic of change and evolution within the Maya area; and (2) gives a predominant role to central Mexican cultures as "creators" of features and undervalues the innovative capacity of the Maya. The second aspect of this view unconsciously reflects many confluent factors in current politics, including Mexican nationalism and North American/European imperialism.

For these reasons, the role of Teotihuacan in the development of Mesoamerica has been overestimated, and a satisfactory explanation for the relationship between that city and the Maya has not been proposed. Moreover, the concept of a "Middle Classic" period is especially problematic not only because of the way it has been defined, but also because of its application as a theoretical tool. In contrast, we prefer to describe the late fourth to sixth centuries as a period characterized by extensive interaction and a high degree of innovation *throughout* Mesoamerica.

Any historical interpretation of Teotihuacan-Maya interaction requires that each trait subject to exchange be placed in a concrete context. We need to determine the point or region of origin of each trait, and if we find actual imports in the Maya area, we need to understand the processes that brought them there. These may include colonization, extensive commerce, isolated contacts, elite alliances, and other possible mechanisms. We should determine which segments of local societies were most affected by interaction. This would allow us to determine when direct contact occurred, and when indirect contact—in which traits were reelaborated within the exchange network through which they were transmitted—was prevalent. In the latter case, we must strive to ascertain the specific cultural meanings assigned to traits at each node in the interaction lattice.

During the late Early Classic, probably as a result of increased commercial interaction, foreign contacts led to the reinterpretation of local traditions from a more cosmopolitan point of view. This could have stimulated not only the development of economic and sociopolitical organization but also local experimentation with foreign ideas. Such experimentation would have involved the processes of adoption, invention, and innovation as described by Robin Torrence and Sander E. van der Leeuw (1989): *adoption* is defined as behaviors and actions developed as much in their acceptance as in the use of that which has been adopted; *innovation* represents the complete process that begins with the conception or invention of a new idea and also includes its acceptance and development; and *invention* means any original conception of a new idea, behavior, or thing.

In the Maya area, one of the clearest examples of innovation is the use of the *talud-tablero* style in the architecture of Oxkintok. At that site, a framed *tablero* of the Tlaxcala-Teotihuacan tradition was incorporated above a typical Maya apron molding. Eclectic art styles that exhibit influences from two or three regions in a single work also are cases of innovation (e.g., Clancy 1979; Coggins 1983; Parsons 1967–1969). Through the study of such styles, we can identify the degree to which local people were receptive to new ideas. Eclecticism is especially evident when motifs from different regions are not only juxtaposed but also synthesized, as in the iconography of Tikal Stela 31 (see Chapter 8). In contrast, the simpler process of adoption can be seen in the architecture of Kaminaljuyu, Tikal, and Dzibilchaltun, where typical Tlaxcala-Teotihuacan *tableros* were used without being combined with the indigenous apron molding (see Chapters 3 and 7).

Not all regions of Mesoamerica participated equally in this interaction, nor did all material goods and cultural traits have the same distribution. For example, there was greater interaction between Monte Albán and Teotihuacan than between either of those sites and the Maya area. If one takes into account both imports and locally produced copies, Matcacapan also appears to have had closer or greater ties with Teotihuacan than did most Maya sites (Santley 1983, 1989), although we hesitate to assert that it contained a Teotihuacan enclave. It is important to remember that the Maya interacted with foreign peoples from sites other than Teotihuacan. As Flora S. Clancy (1979) has shown, some shared iconographic motifs and even more complex features, including calendrical and writing systems, link the Petén to Oaxaca. Parsons (1978) describes an additional series of traits distributed along the Peripheral Coastal Lowlands of Mesoamerica—including both Gulf Coast Veracruz and Pacific Guatemala—that are seldom seen in other regions.

It is necessary, therefore, to determine the meaning, intensity, and distribution of each shared feature. Such a task is made more difficult by the lack of precise and detailed historical sequences in many regions. Nonetheless, there are four clusters of features that are frequently identified with Teotihuacan and that may have reached their maximum geographical distribution during the late fourth to sixth centuries: (1) green obsidian from the Pachuca, Hidalgo, source; (2) a ceramic complex characterized by cylindrical tripod vessels with slab feet, "coffee" (probably cacao) bean appliqué, applied faces, *candeleros*, and Thin Orange ware; (3) *talud-tablero* architecture; and (4) iconographic elements associated with the central Mexican storm god and Teotihuacan notions of warfare (e.g., the atlatl, tasseled headdresses, owls, and butterflies). It is not clear, however, that the appearance of these traits throughout much of Mesoamerica was a result of direct interaction with Teotihuacan. In the specific case of Tikal, many foreign elements and imports may have come from Monte Albán or the Gulf Coast rather than directly from the great highland city (Clancy 1979; Coggins 1983; Iglesias 1987; Laporte 1989).

The late Early Classic period is characterized by an interregionalism manifested in architecture, artistic styles, iconographic language, and ceramic modes that are associated with power and prestige. Evidence for a possible ideological transformation may be discerned throughout Mesoamerica in the eclectic styles and iconography of architectural and artistic traditions. This eclecticism differentiates the fourth to sixth centuries—the late Early Classic or "Middle Classic"—from the preceding period during which, despite the existence of long-distance commercial contacts, each region of Mesoamerica was immersed in its own relatively isolated sociopolitical and economic system. The degree of interaction during the late Early Classic is related to the volume, intensity, and frequency of economic relations, as well as to the power of the polities involved and the distances separating them. Different ideological responses to commercial interaction and political influence are manifested in the particular kinds of material evidence that we find at distinct sites and in different regions. The presence of imported goods, or "identities" (Ball 1983), does not on its own indicate a high level of ideological transformation and participation in the pan-Mesoamerican system. But when innovations or adaptations of foreign traits appear in locally produced architecture, monumental art, and ceramics, it may be supposed that native elites chose to associate themselves with ideas or symbols considered prestigious due to their distant origins, rarity, or power (Ball 1983). Interaction of this sort not only influences the later trajectory of local sociopoliti-

cal development but also generates detectable changes in the archaeological record.

Tikal provides a good example of this process. During the Manik 3 phase, a lineage or house associated with a particular title appropriated a series of foreign features in order to consolidate its prestige and install a new governing dynasty (Laporte 1989: 319–320; Laporte and Fialko 1990). Some of the features of this period were incorporated into the Maya cultural substrate and, in modified form, continued to be used during later periods. The *talud-tablero* structures of the Ik phase are one example. Other features, including the cylindrical tripod vessel and applied “coffee” bean decorations, disappeared. During the ensuing Late Classic period, characteristically Maya polychrome pottery achieved some of its finest expressions.

Because the political and economic strengths that many Mesoamerican centers exhibited during the Late Classic may be due to the nature and dynamics of this earlier period of interregionalism and innovation, it is necessary to isolate and define—in a completely new sense—a “Middle Classic.” Nevertheless, it will be possible to address concepts like political or economic control, acculturation, influence, and syncretism only when detailed and accurate historical sequences have been defined for each cultural region where shared traits are found. As Joseph W. Ball (1983: 126) notes: “Acceptable, defensible reconstructions of general cultural historical events or interpretations of cultural processes must be based upon conjunctive considerations of multiple data sets and compatible syntheses of their support.”

Empirical Framework: Archaeological Data from Northwest Yucatán

In the northern Maya lowlands, evidence for significant interaction with Teotihuacan dates to the last part of the Early Classic period, considerably later than similar data from the central and southern lowlands, and comparable to the latest manifestations in the highlands and Pacific Coast (Figure 1.2). Early Classic interaction between central Mexico and the northern lowlands has received relatively little attention from scholars because the focus of most research has been later periods, because relevant data are scarce, and because central Mexico has rightly been considered a less important source of late Early Classic influence than the Petén and the Maya highlands. In part, this view reflects a common perception that the northern lowlands were somehow peripheral to the central Petén “core.” Moreover, the appearance of central Mexican traits in the north could not be tied closely to the expansion and contraction of Teotihuacan that was described

by Gordon Willey (1974) for the fourth to sixth centuries. The temporal lag between the central and northern lowlands suggests that Teotihuacan "influence" reached northwestern Yucatán during the "Middle Classic Hiatus," a time when Teotihuacan was thought to have *withdrawn* from the Maya region.

Evidence from Oxkintok demonstrates that the Oxkintok Regional phase (A.D. 500/550–600/630) was a period of great architectural activity. The most elaborate burials with the richest mortuary furnishings date to this phase, as do dramatic changes in ceramic forms and decorative techniques. Moreover, it is during the Oxkintok Regional phase that Teotihuacan-related features are seen most clearly in the material record. These characteristics make Oxkintok an ideal site for: (1) evaluating alternative hypotheses of Teotihuacan "influence"; (2) defining the features that characterize interaction at both local and regional levels; and (3) studying change in order to develop processual hypotheses concerning the transition from the Early to Late Classic.

The *talud-tablero* architectural style, specific exotic symbols, and certain characteristics of the ceramic complex appeared during the Oxkintok Regional phase but were not derived from local antecedents. The participation of Oxkintok in a Mesoamerican international system during the sixth century allows the definition of this phase, and by extension, a new and more accurate conceptualization of the "Middle Classic." The necessity of defining anew the Middle Classic period derives from the fact that during the late fourth to sixth centuries, many sites demonstrated for the first time participation in the broader, pan-Mesoamerican network of interaction. Participation in this international system also entailed the introduction of new ideas that may have strengthened and stimulated political development. If we include the fourth to sixth centuries within the Early Classic, we fail to call attention to the political, economic, and ideological changes that made possible the developments of the Late Classic. In the case of Oxkintok, we also create an artificial and qualitative leap from a simpler state to a more complex one, without emphasizing the transitional processes that eventually led to the florescence of Puuc society.

Investigations at Oxkintok

The city of Oxkintok is located some 50 km southwest of Mérida at the northwest extreme of the Puuc zone. In this region the study of the Early to Late Classic transition is particularly important because the processes leading to the great sociopolitical, economic, and artistic achievements of

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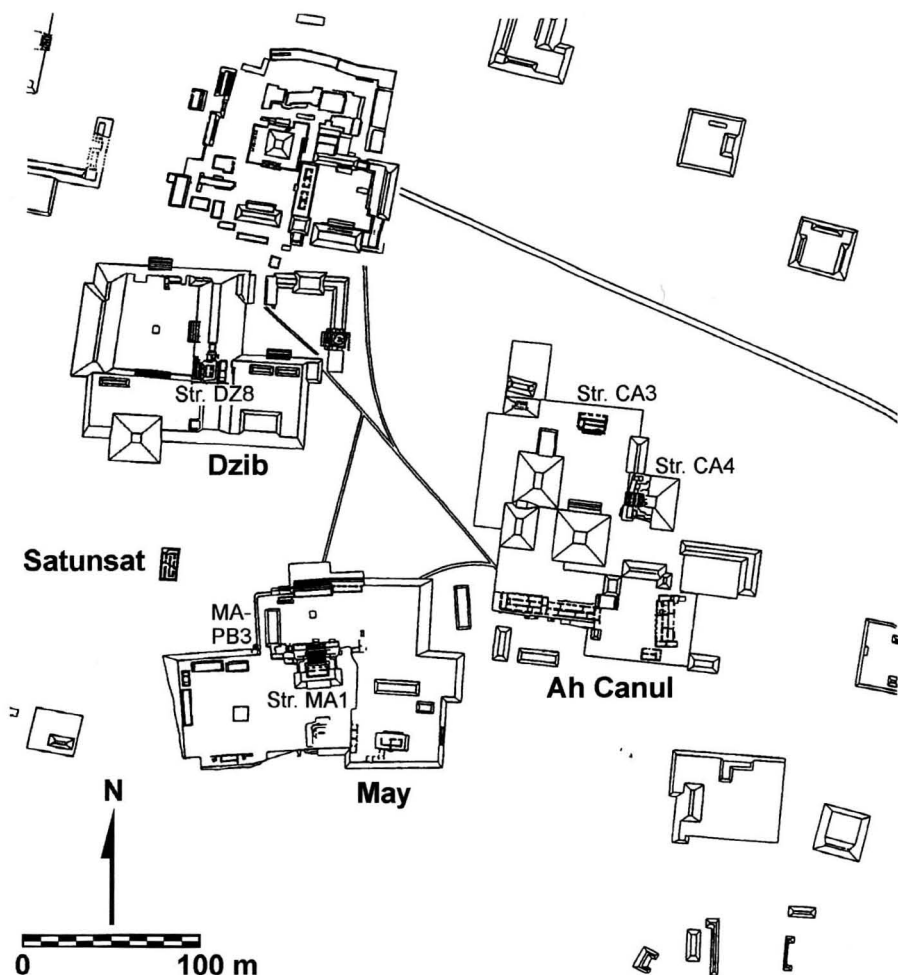


FIGURE 10.1. Central sector of Oxkintok.

the Late to Terminal Classic Puuc florescence are practically unknown. Oxkintok is notable for the antiquity of its hieroglyphic inscriptions; Lintel 1 contains a date of 9.2.0.0.0 (A.D. 475), the earliest-known Long Count date in northern Yucatán (Shook 1940). MAEM's Proyecto Oxkintok was carried out by a multidisciplinary team between 1986 and 1991 and was designed specifically to investigate the period leading up to the Puuc florescence (Rivera Dorado 1988, 1989, 1990, 1992). At the center of the site, we conducted extensive and intensive excavations in the May, Ah Canul, and Dzib architectural groups, and also investigated and consolidated the labyrinthine structure called the Satunsat (Figure 10.1).

Our excavations revealed that Oxkintok grew to be a large Rank I site by or during the fourth century A.D. Most examples of the Early Oxkintok architectural style (Pollock 1980:584) are known from the city, and two sub-phases of the following Proto-Puuc style have been identified as a result of our research (Muñoz Cosme 1990). Several structures built during the Proto-Puuc A subphase (A.D. 500/550–600) contain the *talud-tablero* form. The only possible candidate for an earlier example of this form in the Puuc region was found recently at Chac II. There, an eclectic platform containing a “*talud-tablero*-like architectural profile” and a possible balustrade have been exposed (Smyth 2000).

Polychrome pottery characteristic of the Early Classic lowlands is associated with architecture of the Early Oxkintok style. But ceramics of the Oxkintok Regional complex, first identified by George W. Brainerd (1958), are associated with structures built in the Proto-Puuc A style. Pottery belonging to this second complex manifests what Brainerd called “Teotihuacan influences” in form and decoration. The contextual association of *talud-tablero* architecture, foreign ceramic forms, exotic decorative modes, and pottery belonging to a new local tradition all suggest that an important change in the nature of interaction occurred during the Oxkintok Regional phase.

In the following sections we discuss tombs, an offering, and a midden that date to the Oxkintok Regional phase. We also present a contextual analysis of ceramics, architecture, stone tools, and other artifacts with the goals of (1) describing changes in the cultural tradition of Oxkintok; (2) identifying changes in interregional and long-distance exchange; and (3) demonstrating the development of political complexity that distinguishes the Oxkintok Regional phase from earlier periods.

Primary Contexts Dating to the Oxkintok Regional Phase

A total of eleven tombs were excavated by the Proyecto Oxkintok. Five of these date to the Oxkintok Regional phase and contain the richest furnishings yet found at the site. Variations among the five tombs—defined in terms of spatial position; ceramic offerings; and tomb size, form, and shape—suggest that there were distinct social ranks among high-level elites. This implies that a much higher degree of social complexity existed at the site than in earlier times.

Tomb 1, located in the Satunsat, contained the richest offerings. Its placement in an existing and unique structure may indicate an important shift in the symbolism and function of the building. Chemical analyses of soils in the burial chamber did not reveal the presence of phosphates derived from the

decomposition of organic material (Ortiz and Barba 1992). This implies that the individual was moved after decomposition was complete and reinterred in the Satunsat. Secondary deposition, the limited care with which bones were deposited, and the lack of many important bones are all important characteristics of burials dating to the Oxkintok Regional phase. At the moment, however, the meaning of this burial pattern is not known.

Tombs 2-4 were found in Structure MA1 beneath the floor of the superstructure. The three tombs were aligned with each other and placed perpendicular to the central axis of the building. The individual in Tomb 4, the central of the three interments, was accompanied by the richest offerings. A similar triadic pattern also existed with Tomb 5, found in Structure CA3. Evidence was found of two additional tombs flanking Tomb 5 that were looted in antiquity.

Bodies in the tombs were found in an east-west orientation also seen at Dzibilchaltun, Uaxactun, and Río Azul. Some graves, crypts, or chambers, however, were oriented north-south. Two important differences between burials found in the northern and southern lowlands are that those in the south usually are primary and often have much richer offerings.

The only offering dating to the Oxkintok Regional phase (Offering 8) contained a female figurine carved from a manatee bone. A similar figurine was found in Tikal Burial 22, which dates to the Manik 3A phase (Hatula Moholy-Nagy, personal communication 1996). A somewhat similar example, with a different hand and arm position and four perforations in the breast, was found in Tomb 23 of Río Azul (Adams 1987: 24). Thus, the female figurine from Oxkintok Offering 8 suggests connections to the central Petén.

The Ceramics of Oxkintok and Teotihuacan "Influence"

The complex of material traits that characterize the Oxkintok Regional phase is manifested most clearly in pottery. Substantial changes in the conception and manufacture of ceramics date to this phase. Locally produced polychrome ceramics are absent from the complex. With the exception of rare polychromes imported chiefly from the Chenes and Río Bec regions, the Late and Terminal Classic ceramics of the Puuc are monochromes. During the Oxkintok Regional phase, therefore, the ceramics of the Puuc region began to diverge from the traditions of the southern and central Maya lowlands. Equally important was the introduction of improved firing techniques that ultimately led to the development of Slate ware. Pottery belonging to the Early Classic Ichpá complex exhibits a high degree of formal variation. In contrast, large-scale manufacturing of highly standardized ceramics during

the Oxkintok Regional phase suggests the emergence of a centralized power that controlled production.

Seven forms and one ceramic ware are frequently discussed as evidence of interaction with Teotihuacan. These are: (1) cylindrical tripod vases; (2) *candeleros*; (3) *copas*; (4) *floreros*; (5) “cream pitchers”; (6) Teotihuacan-style figurines; (7) Teotihuacan-style incense burners; and (8) Thin Orange ware. Thin Orange ware—produced in Puebla and not at Teotihuacan itself (Rattray 1990; Rattray and Harbottle 1992)—is unknown at Oxkintok. Moreover, only two of the forms, the cylindrical tripod vase and the *candelero*, have been found at the site. The latter is represented by a solitary example recently discovered in a burial excavated by Ricardo Velázquez Valadez. These exotic forms are even rarer elsewhere in the Puuc. Michael Smyth (2000) has reported a burial at Chac II that contained a second *candelero* as well as a cylindrical vase “similar to *florero* vessel forms from Teotihuacan,” but no other examples of these two forms are known from northwest Yucatán.

The tripod cylinders of Oxkintok and other sites in northwest Yucatán often have open-work supports (Figure 10.2b) or an otherwise unique decorative form: modeled supports representing bats (Figure 10.2a). Moreover, compared to similar vessels from elsewhere in the Maya area, the tripod cylinders of northwest Yucatán are characterized by a greater simplicity. Plano-relief, gouged-incised, and stucco decorations all are absent. Most frequently, the body walls of vessels lack decoration. If decoration is present, it appears in the form of fluting or, more rarely, as appliqué faces around the base of the vessel.

In contrast, fluted cylindrical tripods are completely unknown at Teotihuacan, as are modeled supports depicting bats. Nor are there any known examples with appliqué faces, as have been found on tripod cylinders from both the northern lowlands and the Petén (Iglesias 1987:lámينا XXIXp; Varela Torrecilla 1998:figura 4.16). In addition to the distinctive iconographic program (bat supports and small appliqué faces), the occasional presence of pre-slip fluting, and the lack of painted stucco, tripod cylinders from northwest Yucatán also differ in their proportions. They are relatively taller and narrower than similar vessels from Teotihuacan.

Evelyn Rattray (1977, 1983) argues that the tripod cylinder vase originated in the Gulf Coast region and not at Teotihuacan. Furthermore, the basic form—without the modal characteristics of Teotihuacan—was used in Preclassic Kaminaljuyu. Thus the tripod cylinder of Oxkintok represents a local adoption of this form, but it is unclear if the source of inspiration was Teotihuacan, Veracruz, or elsewhere in the Maya region. Moreover, aspects

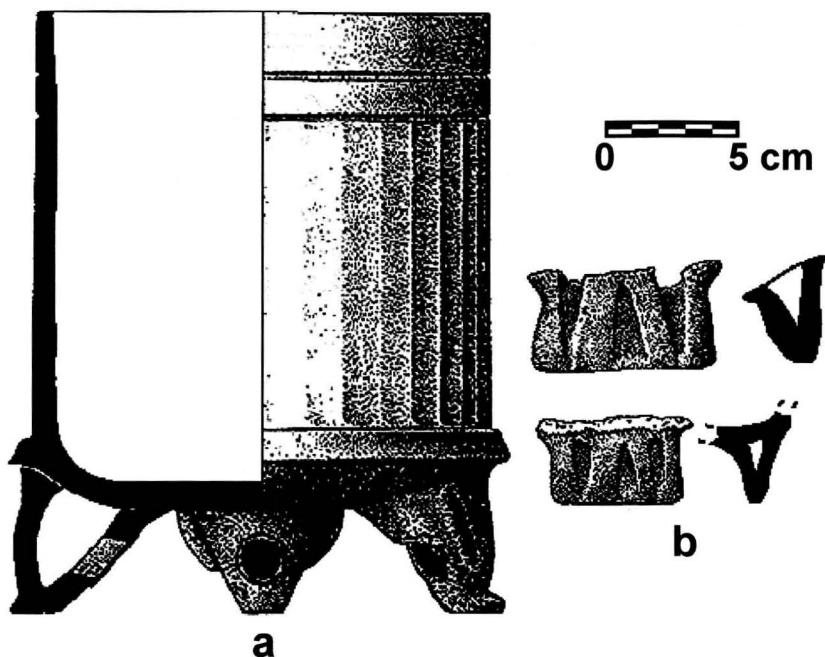


FIGURE 10.2. Tripod cylinders from Oxkintok: (a) Pebra Composite: Pebra vessel from Tomb 1 (note bat-effigy supports); (b) Kochol Black: Kochol open-work supports (redrawn from Varela Torrecilla 1998: figuras 3.29b,c and 3.104).

of the decorative techniques and iconographic program of examples from northwest Yucatán are innovations unique to that region. As argued by Foias (1987), the tripod cylinder appears to be a pan-Mesoamerican form that developed distinct local variants.

Much closer ties can be seen between the Oxkintok Regional complex and the ceramics of the Maya highlands and central lowlands. Two types belonging to the Oxkintok Regional complex (Chactún Crema Delgado and Chactún Crema Gubiado), particularly those examples with gouged decorations, closely resemble Ivory ware from Kaminaljuyu. The pastes of the Oxkintok types, however, are completely different, suggesting that they are local imitations. Another possible connection with Kaminaljuyu and other sites in the highlands of Guatemala is the use of bat iconography. Bats appear on pottery at Kaminaljuyu beginning in the Late Preclassic, and bat iconography dating to the middle of the Classic period seems to be restricted largely to the Guatemalan highlands, Copán, and northwest Yucatán.

Connections with the central Maya lowlands can also be seen in the Oxkintok Regional complex. Two groups of imported ceramics, Mudanza and

Balanza, come from this region. There also are parallels between the Hunabchén and Kochol groups of Oxkintok and the Aguila Red-Orange and Pucté groups of the central lowlands. Finally, the lid of a tripod cylinder from Oxkintok Tomb 4 has a handle in the form of a water bird. Very similar depictions are known from Tikal, Uaxactun, and Kaminaljuyu (Varela Torrecilla 1998:193, figura 3.113b).

The *Talud-Tablero* Form in the Architecture of Oxkintok

Ceramics of the Oxkintok Regional complex were found associated with pyramidal structures decorated with *taludes* and *tableros*. These include Structures MA1 (Figure 10.3), DZ8-sub, and CA4. More recently, Ricardo Velázquez Valadez has identified other structures containing the form. The presence of *talud-tablero* architecture links Oxkintok to other large sites in the Maya highlands and lowlands, and also to the complex pan-Mesoamerican interaction network of the late fourth to sixth centuries. At Oxkintok, *taludes* and *tableros* are found on structures built in the Proto-Puuc A style. On a regional level, the style is concentrated in the south to west Puuc zone, with additional examples found at Uayalceh, Yaxcopoil, Acanceh, Ti-ho, Dzibilchaltun, and Ixil—all located in the plains north of Oxkintok.

In the Maya area, the regions that contain the greatest concentration of *talud-tablero* architecture are the central highlands and central Petén of Guatemala. According to Paul Gendrop (1984:16), “provincial modalities” of the form developed in the southern zone and appear to have radiated to the northern lowlands. In the latter region, examples are found on pyramidal, palace, temple, and altar platforms. They are characterized by the combination of a framed *tablero* with an apron molding and plinth, but Structure 612 of Dzibilchaltun is built in a more typically Teotihuacan fashion (Andrews 1981:325–326) and some *tableros* are not framed.

The apron molding originated in the Maya area. It appeared for the first time around 100 B.C. and is found at a wide variety of Late Preclassic sites, including Uaxactun, Tikal, Chiapa de Corzo, and Acanceh. In contrast, the framed *tableros* of Oxkintok and other northern sites appear to derive ultimately from the Tlaxcala-Teotihuacan tradition. Similar framed *tableros* are found at Kaminaljuyu, Tikal, Copán, Tazumal, and Becan in the Maya highlands and central lowlands. As discussed by Laporte (Chapter 7), the earliest Maya structures containing framed *tableros* date to the late third century A.D., but most were built during the late fourth to sixth centuries (Chapters 3 and 5). During the Late Classic at Tikal, additional *talud-tablero* structures

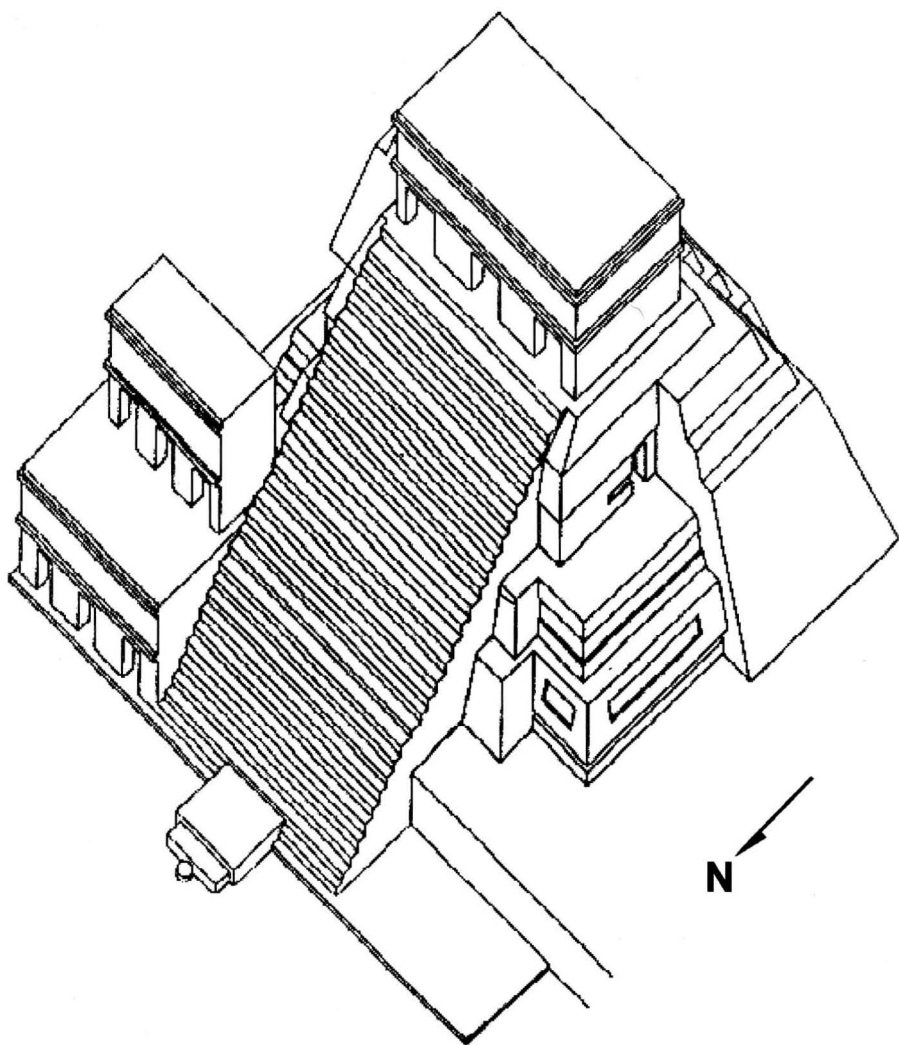


FIGURE 10.3. Ideal reconstruction of Oxkintok Structure MA1, displaying *talud-tablero* style of Structure MA1-sub (redrawn from an illustration by Alfonso Muñoz).

were built or modified by adding a cornice in order to produce the *atadura* (cinch) profile typical of Veracruz (Chapter 7; Kubler 1984:81). In north-west Yucatán, however, structures containing the *talud-tablero* form were typically abandoned or covered with Late Classic architecture of the Proto-Puuc B and Early Puuc styles.

Many early examples of the *tablero* at Tikal do not pass completely around a structure (Chapter 7; Laporte 1989:135–136). Instead, the form is limited to

the front or the front and sides, where it merges into the mass of the platform. Partial *tableros* are also found at Oxkintok and Dzibilchaltun, strengthening the suggestion that their appearance in the northern lowlands should be attributed to interaction with the Petén.

The relative heights of *talud-tableros* vary from site to site and sometimes within a particular site. At Maticapan and Kaminaljuyu, proportions of 1:1 apparently are the rule. Early *talud-tableros* at Tikal share this proportion, but later versions were built with a 1:2 ratio. At Oxkintok and Dzibilchaltun, the relative proportions range from 1:2 to 1:2.5. Like Tikal, Teotihuacan experimented with different proportions, with examples ranging from 1:1.3 to 1:2.6 (Chapters 4 and 12; Santley 1987). Thus, the *talud-tableros* of the northern lowlands have proportions that are more similar to those of later structures in the Petén and some examples from central Mexico than they are to those of the Gulf Coast and the Maya highlands.

In sum, the *talud-tablero* structures of Oxkintok and other sites in northwest Yucatán suggest that (1) the local manifestation of the form is a “provincial modality” in the sense used by Gendrop (1984); and (2) the form probably diffused northward from the Petén, where the apron molding developed during the Late Preclassic period,¹ and where framed *tableros* were used at an early date to decorate the fronts and sides of platforms.

We do not know why the *talud-tablero* and tripod cylinder appeared later in northwest Yucatán than they did in the central lowlands and the Maya highlands. It is conceivable that our absolute chronologies for the relevant architectural styles and ceramics of Oxkintok are in error. Late dates for the Early Oxkintok architectural style and associated Early Classic polychrome ceramics derive from the carved lintels of Oxkintok, none of which were found in their original contexts. They may have been set originally in structures built in the Proto-Puuc A style, and hence precisely date the construction of *talud-tablero* buildings. Some tenuous support for this position comes from Hieroglyphic Stair 1, which provides access to the Dzib group. The date of 6 Kawak “completion of” Yaaxk’in on the stair is consistent with a Long Count date of 9.5.3.2.19 (A.D. 537; García Campillo 1994:712). Moreover, José Miguel García Campillo (personal communication 1993) suggests that the calligraphic style of the stair is contemporary with or slightly later than that of the Early Classic lintels. The Dzib group contains a *talud-tablero* structure that is roughly contemporaneous with Hieroglyphic Stair 1, so it is possible that the *talud-tablero* form was already in use at Oxkintok at the beginning of the sixth century. A radiocarbon sample and a hieroglyphic inscription from Dzibilchaltun Structure 1-sub date that *talud-tablero* building

to the beginning of the sixth century. Thus, although no radiocarbon dates have been determined for Oxkintok, it is reasonable to date the appearance of the *talud-tablero* form in northwest Yucatán and the beginning of the Oxkintok Regional phase to about A.D. 500.

Other Artifacts

Obsidian. A total of ten obsidian artifacts were found in Tombs 1, 4, and 5 (the three richest tombs) and the two looted tombs of Structure CA3. No obsidian was found in Tombs 2 or 3 (those that flank Tomb 4) or in Offering 8. All ten pieces are gray in color, and a comparative analysis indicates that the primary source of the material probably is El Chayal, Guatemala. Although the obsidian from the tombs should be sourced, green obsidian—frequently cited as indicating interaction with Teotihuacan—is notably absent from these primary contexts.

Fifty-three additional obsidian artifacts were recovered from a midden deposit called MA-PB3 (May Group, Basal Platform, Pit 3). This deposit, which dates to a time late in the Oxkintok Regional phase, was discovered by extending Brainerd's original trench. All of the obsidian artifacts in this context are gray. We have analyzed fifty-two of the fifty-three artifacts, and have identified them as coming from El Chayal (N=42, 81%), San Martín Jilotepeque (N=8, 15%), and Ixtepeque (N=1, 2%)—all sources located in the highlands of Guatemala. A single piece (2%) closely resembles material from the Zaragoza, Puebla, source area, but should be chemically sourced. Zaragoza is near the important city of Cantona, and material from the source was traded extensively down the Gulf Coast during both Classic and Epi-classic times. The presence of this blade fragment, therefore, probably should not be attributed to Teotihuacan. Instead, it may reflect the participation of Oxkintok in a Gulf Coast trade network spreading from central Veracruz to northwest Yucatán.

We have analyzed an additional 487 obsidian artifacts excavated by our project. Although 58 percent of this material comes from six central Mexican sources, both contextual and technological data support a Terminal Classic to Early Postclassic date for the exotic obsidian. Of the 170 blade fragments made of Pachuca green obsidian, 39 are proximal fragments. An additional 63 proximal fragments come from the Ucareo, Zaragoza, Paredón, and Otumba sources, also located in highland Mexico. All 102 proximal blade fragments of exotic Mexican obsidian have pecked-and-ground platforms, a technological innovation that appeared in both central Mexico and the Maya region at about A.D. 800. In contrast, obsidian blades produced at

Classic-period Teotihuacan have simple facet platforms. Such platforms—also seen on late Early Classic Pachuca obsidian found at Kaminaljuyu and Copán—are *not* found on central Mexican obsidian blades in the Oxkintok collection. This may be taken as very strong technological evidence that exotic obsidian blades—with the exception of the possible Zaragoza artifact in the midden—date to a time *after* both the Oxkintok Regional phase and the decline of Teotihuacan. The suite of Mexican sources in the collection and their relative frequencies also strongly support a Terminal Classic to Early Postclassic date.

Green obsidian was first used at other sites in the Maya lowlands by the Late Preclassic and occurs in all periods through the Terminal Classic (Chapter 9; Moholy-Nagy 1999a; Moholy-Nagy and Nelson 1990; Moholy-Nagy et al. 1984). Pachuca obsidian is rare (usually no more than 2% of an assemblage) before the Terminal Classic and is typically found in elite ritual and ceremonial contexts, particularly burials (Spence 1996a). Some green obsidian, however, has been found in domestic contexts. Given the wide if sparse distribution of Pachuca obsidian in contexts dating to before, during, and after the period for which we have other material evidence of interaction with Teotihuacan, it should not be assumed that all green obsidian found at Maya sites implies contact with the great highland city. In any event, no green obsidian has been found in Oxkintok Regional-phase contexts.

Chert. Only four chert artifacts come from primary contexts dating to the Oxkintok Regional phase. Two of these are projectile points from Tomb 2 and a second context (PP-10/III). Additionally, two primary decortification flakes were found in the MA-PB3 midden. Chert is locally abundant and found in the form of nodules embedded in limestone. The earliest chert artifacts found so far at the site date to the Early Classic, and use was common through the Terminal Classic period. Curiously, the projectile point from Tomb 2 is the only one in any of the eleven tombs excavated by the Proyecto Oxkintok.

Jadeite. Jade can be considered an indicator of wealth and is found in elite ritual and ceremonial contexts. The jade used at Oxkintok almost certainly was imported from a source near San Cristóbal Acasaguastlán in the Motagua Valley of Guatemala. The importation and use of this material at Oxkintok began during the Early Classic period (Offering 4), but elaborate mosaic masks of jade were made only during the Oxkintok Regional phase. Such masks were recovered from Tombs 1 and 5. At other Maya sites—including Tikal, Abaj Takalik, Palenque, Río Azul, and especially Calakmul—mosaic jade masks were interred in elite burials dating from the Early to Ter-

minal Classic. The presence of such masks at Oxkintok ties the site to the central and southern lowlands and also to the Pacific piedmont of Guatemala. They also suggest that the Oxkintok Regional phase was a particularly prosperous period in the history of the city.

Other jade artifacts were recovered from Tombs 1, 3-5, and one of the looted tombs in Structure CA3. They include beads of various forms, anthropomorphic pendants, zoomorphic plaques, celts, disks, and earpools. All of the forms and decorative motifs are characteristically Maya. A zoomorphic plaque from Tomb 1 somewhat resembles a pendant that was found at the head of Skeleton 1 from Kaminaljuyu Tomb B-I (Kidder et al. 1946:Figure 149b).

Throughout the Maya region, the distributional range and quantity of jade found in tombs increased considerably during the fifth and sixth centuries A.D. This can be interpreted as an indicator of expanding trade, a sign of the increased wealth of members of the elite class, or an indication of growing political complexity.

Cinnabar. The Maya frequently used cinnabar (the mineral mercuric sulfide, also called vermilion) in funeral ceremonies and rituals of regeneration, almost certainly because the red color of the mineral suggests blood and life. It is particularly common in royal burials, but quantitative data of the sort needed to determine if its use increased over time have not been assembled. The closest known source of cinnabar is in the highlands of Quetzaltenango, but it is probable that other deposits exist in the Guatemalan highlands (Lou 1994:117). Other sources are found in the mountains of Honduras, and the distribution of "poison bottles," a rare ceramic form in which traces of mercury have been found, is concentrated in the southeastern Maya region. These vessels probably were receptacles for cinnabar.

Cinnabar was found in two of the tombs dating to the Oxkintok Regional phase. In Tomb 4, the mineral was found embedded in the zoomorphic handle of the cover to a tripod cylinder. In Tomb 5, it was found on an intentionally broken mosaic jade mask. The use of cinnabar at Oxkintok implies interaction with the Maya highlands of Guatemala or inhabitants of western Honduras. Smyth (2000) reports five "poison bottles" associated with burials at the Puuc site Chac II. Descriptions of these vessels indicate that they are very different from the "poison bottles" of Honduras and southeast Guatemala, but their general shape and context suggest that they may have served a similar function.

Shell. Marine shell was used at Oxkintok throughout the occupation of the site to make ornaments. In a recent review of malacological data from

Oxkintok, Rafael Cobos (2001) has identified a total of eleven species, all but two from the nearby coast of northern Campeche. But only two species, *Spondylus americanus* and *Oliva reticularis*, have been identified in contexts dating to the Oxkintok Regional phase. A total of 351 artifacts manufactured of *S. americanus* were found in each of the five numbered tombs, the two looted tombs, and the offering. All are beads, pendants, or other perforated adornments. The greatest quantity from any one context is a collection of 273 small beads from one of the looted tombs in Structure CA3. Two small pendants of *O. reticularis* were recovered from the other looted tomb. Finally, two unmodified fragments of *S. americanus* were recovered from the midden MA-PB3.

S. americanus was traded to Oxkintok from the north coast of Yucatán. Artifacts made of *S. americanus* are commonly found in Late Classic sites throughout the northern lowlands, the Petén, Belize, and western Honduras (Moholy-Nagy 1963). It is curious that, with the exception of the two ornaments made of *O. reticularis*, species native to the nearby Campeche coast were not used during the Oxkintok Regional phase. Moholy-Nagy (1963) notes a more dramatic shift in procurement patterns at Tikal. During the Early Classic period, most species in the shell assemblage came from the Pacific. In contrast, Atlantic (including the coasts of Campeche, Yucatán, and the Caribbean) species were used more commonly during the Late Classic period.

Interaction and Problems of Evidence

An appraisal of the artifacts recovered from contexts dating to the Oxkintok Regional phase reveals that interregional commerce was oriented toward the Maya highlands. Goods like jade, cinnabar, and obsidian came from this region; two ceramic types appear to be copies of Ivory ware from Kaminaljuyu; and the use of bat iconography suggests ties with the Maya highlands of Guatemala and Honduras. Also important were connections with the central Maya lowlands. Pottery belonging to the Mudanza and Balanza groups was imported from that region, and two locally produced ceramic groups exhibit close parallels with groups from the central lowlands.

Nonetheless, an important change of the Oxkintok Regional phase was that potters of Oxkintok ceased making polychrome pottery in the Petén tradition. The absence of polychromes is one of the important hallmarks of the ceramic complexes of later periods in northwest Yucatán. Thus, it seems likely that interaction between the Puuc and the central lowlands began to decline at the end of the Early Classic period.

Participation in an interaction network extending to other parts of Mesoamerica may be seen in the adoption of the framed *tablero*, the cylindrical tripod vessel, plain slab ceramic supports, and the “coffee” bean and face appliqués found on some pottery. With the exception of the framed *tablero* of the Tlaxcalan-Teotihuacan tradition and perhaps the tripod cylinder (cf. Foias 1987), the ultimate origin of each of these material traits is unknown. Nor is the immediate source from which Oxkintok received these ideas known, but some data suggest that it was the central Maya lowlands and highlands. Most important, the mechanisms of interaction that brought these material traits to the northwest Petén are not understood. Direct and sustained interaction with Teotihuacan seems quite unlikely because no items—such as green obsidian from the Pachuca source or Thin Orange ware from Puebla—have been found in Oxkintok Regional-phase contexts. We can say, however, that manifestations of foreign traits were limited to public displays of rank and power, particularly the construction of monumental architecture and the burial rituals of elites. Moreover, each trait was subject to the processes of adoption, adaptation, and innovation. What we see is not a “site-unit intrusion” where foreign styles, technologies, fashions, and motifs replaced local ones. Instead, evidence from Oxkintok suggests that exotic concepts were incorporated with local ideas in new ways.

Burial patterns of the Oxkintok Regional phase exhibit important innovations. Although our sample is too small to assert that the pattern is typical of the period, the triadic form—elite tombs flanked symmetrically to east and west by interments with less elaborate grave goods—seems to be unique to Oxkintok. It also is important that the mortuary furnishings of this period are, in general, more elaborate than in earlier times. T. Patrick Culbert (1994) has observed that fourth- and fifth-century burials in the southern and central lowlands became richer in the quantity of vessels, shell, and jade that accompanied the deceased. This observation can be extended to Oxkintok during the Oxkintok Regional phase.

Analysis of the distribution of Proto-Puuc A architecture in northwest Yucatán and its association with ceramics of the Oxkintok Regional complex has revealed two problems. First, there may be a mismatch in the proposed chronologies of the Puuc region and the northern plains of Yucatán (Varela Torrecilla 1998:221–225). In particular, it appears that architecture at Dzibilchaltun dated to the Copo I phase (defined as A.D. 600–800) is contemporary with Proto-Puuc A and B architecture at Oxkintok (A.D. 500/550–700). Perhaps dates given to buildings of this style at one or both sites are incorrect. Alternatively, the style may have diffused slowly from the

Puuc region to the northern plains.² A much greater problem is that there are no published ceramic sequences for other sites where Proto-Puuc architecture is found. Most have seen little investigation. It should be noted that twelve sites with Proto-Puuc architecture are located in a band to the south of Oxkintok, near the natural corridor of the Campeche coast. Sites in this region that particularly require investigation are Bakna, Kanki, Xkaxtun, Cacabxnuuc, and Chelemi. Elsewhere, Xkukican and the North Acropolis of Uxmal should be studied. An understanding of the transition from the Early Oxkintok to Proto-Puuc style at these sites would allow us to study with greater precision the processes of change that occurred throughout the region during the sixth century.

Conclusions

The historical problem at the root of the “Middle Classic” is the transition to state-level polities. It now is widely recognized that complex states emerged in the central and southern Maya lowlands long before the fourth to sixth centuries, and the notion that such developments should be attributed to the intervention of Teotihuacan in the political affairs of the Petén is thoroughly discredited (Chapter 1). Nonetheless, the first states of northwest Yucatán emerged at a relatively late date. It still is valid to ask if Teotihuacan played a role in political development in this region.

Excavations at Oxkintok have revealed that during the sixth century A.D., this already large site became much more prosperous. A great increase in wealth is evident in the scale of monumental architecture constructed at that time, in sculpture, and particularly in the grave goods found in elite tombs. It seems quite likely that during the Oxkintok Regional phase, an elite class of rulers consolidated power and wealth within their realm and transformed the political system of the region into a centralized and hierarchically organized state.

Throughout Mesoamerica the accumulation of wealth and social prestige began in the Early Preclassic period. Even in early times, certain important sites in distinct regions—such as the Basin of Mexico, Oaxaca, central Veracruz, the Petén, the northern lowlands, and the Maya highlands—engaged in intermittent contact. Over time, some of these interactions became more regular, direct, and intense. The autonomous political groups that engaged in this interaction can be called “peer polities” in the sense used by Colin Renfrew (1986).

The widespread distribution of specific goods, architecture, and iconographic motifs associated with power during the fourth–sixth centuries A.D.

may be the result of a long-term process that began first at centers where centralized power was already established: Teotihuacan, Monte Albán, Tikal, Copán, and Kaminaljuyu. Over the course of time, other sites in regions with simpler political systems began to participate in this interaction network. They too emerged as new and vital states. We see sixth-century Oxkintok as an example of this second set of sites. There is sufficient evidence to propose that at this time, local social and political systems became elaborate enough to stimulate the genesis and development of the Puuc region. At Oxkintok, it is likely that participation in the international system—which included not only Teotihuacan but also polities in the central lowlands and Maya highlands—resulted in the introduction of new ideas that were used by local elites to reformulate existing political, social, and economic systems. This began a process of strengthening centralized power that culminated during the eighth-century reign of the Oxkintok king Walas.

Ceramics are one of the most sensitive indicators of this process. Three important changes—the cessation of the manufacture of polychromes, the development of hard-paste ceramics, and the standardization of production—date to this phase. The production of large quantities of highly standardized pottery was an important economic change that most likely reflects the establishment of a centralized power controlling ceramic production at Oxkintok (Varela Torrecilla and Montero 1994).

It should be stressed that participation in the pan-Mesoamerican exchange system increased over time, reaching its peak at Oxkintok long after the decline of Teotihuacan. Most of the obsidian consumed in the city during the Terminal Classic/Early Postclassic was imported from central Mexican sources. Sculpture carved during this late period exhibits eclectic iconographic motifs, but the carved monuments of the Oxkintok Regional phase do not. Thus, the sixth century should be viewed as the beginning of Oxkintok's participation in a far-flung interaction network. As first Teotihuacan and then cities in the central lowland waned, sites like Oxkintok began to interact with new, emerging partners in other regions.

Participation in this international system was not uniform across the Maya region. Many more ceramic imports from other parts of Mesoamerica have been found at Early Classic sites in the Guatemalan Pacific Coast, highlands, and central lowlands. Moreover, there is greater evidence for the development during the fourth to sixth centuries of an eclectic iconography in these regions than in northwest Yucatán. Why these differences existed is one of the key questions still to be answered.

Acknowledgment

We thank our friend Clifford Brown for his expert help in translating from Spanish a portion of a previous version of this chapter.

Notes

1. The Pyramid at Acanceh, which dates to the Late Preclassic period, also contains apron moldings. It might be, therefore, that the architects who built the *talud-tablero* structures of northwest Yucatán were already familiar with local antecedents of the apron molding.

2. A similar temporal discrepancy has been noted by E. Wyllys Andrews V (1981:332, Figure 11-1) for the appearance of later Puuc-style architecture at Dzibilchaltun. Rather than arguing for contemporaneity of the style in both regions, he interprets the time lag as real.