

ARCHAEOLOGY, POLITICAL ECONOMY, AND THE ANCIENT MAYA COMMONER

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Abstract

Most archaeology in Central America focuses on revealing the lives of ancient elites, owners of awe-inspiring monuments and ritual spaces. Commoners, those constituting the vast majority of present and past populations, are much less likely than elites to be featured in historic literature, even though they are the most abundant figures in the archaeological record. In recent years, however, a new group of scholars have begun investigating the lives of ancient Maya commoners. Their findings have the potential to not only reveal more of the ancient Maya story, but to rewrite it. Using models that test the commoners' control of ancient production technologies and settlement patterns, archaeologists have found evidence of social networks that defy the classic hierarchical interpretation of power. Instead of finding a class of powerless slave-laborers, they have revealed a commoner-class of free moving individuals producing goods from their private household manufacturing facilities.

In this paper I examine the work of archaeologists at a number of Central American sites, using their data to paint an entirely more complex picture of ancient Maya life. In particular, I apply a specific model of "heterarchical power" to the ancient Maya to see how it might better explain the lives of commoners. I argue that commoners have long been overlooked because of narrow interpretative models that have resulted in research that is neither self-reflective nor correlated with ethnographic evidence. I show that successful Mesoamerican archaeological excavations come as a result of the thorough investigation of multiple lines of evidence such as ethnography, experimentation, and site formation processes.

Introduction

The majority of archaeological excavations in Central America focus attention on ancient elites, owners of awe-inspiring monuments and ritual spaces, paying little attention to the lives of commoners. In recent years however, a new group of scholars have begun investigating the lives of ancient Maya commoners. Their findings have the potential to not only reveal more of the ancient Maya story, but to rewrite it. Using models that test the commoners' control of production technology, scholars find social networks defying the classic hierarchical interpretation of power. Instead of finding a class of powerless slave-laborers, archaeologists have revealed the commoner-class to be free moving individuals producing goods from their private household manufacturing facilities. In this paper I examine the work of archaeologists and ethnographers at a number of Central American sites, using their data to paint a more complex picture of ancient Maya life.

Commoners are the most abundant figures in the archaeological record (Lohse and Valdez 2004), yet we know comparatively little about their lives. Although many modern archaeologists aim to rediscover those people erased from history, the discipline has likely neglected Maya commoners a result of narrow interpretative theories (Marcus 1983). Lohse and Valdez (2004:1-22) suggest that questions concerning commoners transcend all singular theoretical positions, thus I will focus on a model of heterarchical power that allows for unbounded definitions of power both temporally and spatially.

Traditionally Maya site classification is based upon the city arrangement itself, without considering the larger political space the residents of a city may have controlled through trade or social networks (Yeager 2003:122). Modern researchers (Balkansky et al 1990, Beach and Beach 2004, Chase et al 1990, Curet 1993, Deal 1982, Deal 1991, Guderjan In Press, Guderjan et al 2003, Joyce 1994, Kvamme et al 1996, Porr 1990, Pyburn et al 1998, Santley et al 1989, Scarborough et al 2003, Willey 1980, Yeager 2003) however, have acquired a vast understanding of the movement of material culture within ancient landscapes. Material culture networks have the power to fuel an argument for a commoner-controlled political landscape, when the goods of this commoner class defy, or out-move, the

boundaries of elite artifacts.

New models for research and excavation have developed in North American archaeology in the past two decades that can aid Mesoamerican archaeology in its pursuit of an accurate depiction of ancient life. These investigation techniques are known as *behavioral*, and rely on the investigation of multiple lines of evidence such as ethnography, experimentation, site formation processes, and the use-wear analysis of artifacts (Schiffer and Skibo 1989, Schiffer et al. 2001, Skibo 1992). Evidence from behavioral excavations and ethnohistorical studies challenge Mayanists to rethink theoretical models of political organization, power distribution, and trade networking. In my examination of archaeological and ethnological data, I focus on household production as an economic activity through which commoners had access to power and trade networks. Commoner production output represents a major component of agency overlooked by most Mesoamerican archaeologists. Production technology is well researched by practitioners from a behavioral school of archaeology (Arnold 1990, Balkansky et al 1997, Curet 1993, Deal 1982 and 1991, Hendon 1996, Joyce et al 1993, Kvamme et al 1996, Porr 1999, Santley et. al. 1989, Schiffer and Skibo 1987 and 1989, Schiffer et al 2001, Skibo 1992, Varela-Lopez et al 2001). By integrating their research into existing archaeological data, new ideas about ancient political economies, and commoner life take form.

Economic and Political Organization Among the Ancient Maya

The archaeology of Mesoamerica suggests that certain centralized social structures and artifacts existed that distinguish the people of the Mayan region from other Native American indigenous groups. Anthropologically trained archaeologists dispute the idea that there were ever a single, unified Maya people (Coe 2002:11). The very term *ancient Maya* has come under attack (Joyce 2005) because of the way it homogenizes diverse groups of Mayan peoples¹. While I acknowledge these critiques, I believe my argument for a focus on commoner economic production and heterarchical trade networks could be applied to all of the Mayan groups and perhaps to other historically hierarchically defined societies. Thus I use “ancient” Maya to refer to those peoples of approximately C.E. 450-1000, known in Mesoamerican literature as the Classic, and Late or Post Classic Era. In reference to the “Maya People”, I’m referring to the *ancient* indigenous people of the region that is now Central America, who shared aspects of their cosmos and social organization during these time periods.

Popular culture and certain Mayanist scholars suggest that we know how Mayan state governments operated, and furthermore that commoners under the control of an elite Maya hierarchical regime labored in a controlled, almost systematic way. This is factually based, as aspects of the hierarchy of ancient Maya life are reflected in architectural arrangement, site location selection, and certainly in elite art. Their political and social structures often coincide with a centralized astrology based spiritual system, widely dispersed and interpreted (Tedlock 1996). To suggest that a hierarchy existed of the extent that has been imagined and emphasized by some Mayanists may, however, be misleading (Crumley et. al. 1995). This misunderstanding is caused by an interpretive model that excludes a thorough depiction of the commoner. When we redefine the commoner, whose very name implies a low social status and political position, we begin to not only understand ancient lives better, but also ancient identities.

My examination of political organization will focus on the Petén region of modern day Guatemala, Belize, and Yucatan, Mexico (Fig. 1). The Petén is a rain forest environment with a great diversity of site patterns and intersecting trade networks. In this hot, subtropical environment are thousands of sites large and small, acting as ceremonial, residential, and trading centers such as Tikal, Lamanai, Xunantunich, Altun Ha, La Milpa, Blue Creek, and Seibal.

Understanding Power: Heterarchy vs Hierarchy

The question of social organization lies at the heart of any discussion of complex societies. Maya political theory falls broadly into two categories, heterarchy and hierarchy. Generally, hierarchical



Figure 1. The Maya Region and my research sites²

frameworks depict a vertically structured power distribution controlled by elites, while heterarchical frameworks emphasize the underlying social interactions of the majority population, within which more complex social networks emerge. These two foundational theories are not necessarily exclusive of each other, but research designed to explore one or the other will return significantly different results.

Rautman (1998:327) explains that the hierarchical system “involves three assumptions regarding the organizational elements of a system: that a lineal ranking is in fact present; that this ranking is permanent (that is, the system of ranking has temporal stability); and the ranking of elements according to different criteria will result in the same overall ranking (that is, the relationships of elements is pervasive and integral to the system, and not situational).” In this view, the archaeologist interprets everything in a greater-than or less-than fashion when referring to an object or site. This puts people, objects, buildings, and trade networks in a vertically measured system of power, leaving powerful artifacts, then, to be identified by an archaeologist.

Every *thing* fits within a hierarchy of sorts, from the categorization of tools to the principals of a funeral procession. Some people stand as gatekeepers, others as barterers, tribute collectors, or law enforcers. Communities then act in the same way, constructing dominant and subordinate relationships to each other. When compared, an interdependent group of villages each producing a specialized good, will fall into a hierarchy, as will independent polities who produce everything they need and have no

exported goods.

Evidence of hierarchy abounds in the surviving art and monuments of elite compounds, palaces, places of worship, and ethnographic histories. But is this vertical system of power enough to explain the complexity of social relations in the archaeological record? Perhaps it does well to explain archaeological sites with abundant elite residences and monumental architecture, but we still see little of the commoners in this story outside of their traditional place in the framework as the peons or slaves to nobility.

To update previous hierarchical models of political and economic organization, a new term *heterarchy* has been introduced. Heterarchy refers to the vast, complex interdependencies that exist within, and in a number of ways, control hierarchies (Scarborough et al 2003). Multiple hierarchies may exist in this system. Crumley (1995:3), in explaining the social order of medieval France, describes a heterarchy as “the relation of elements to one another when they are unranked or when they possess the potential for being ranked in a number of different ways.” When looking only through the eyes of a top-down, or bottom-up social, political, or economic system, scholars ignore the complexity of ancient life. Archaeologists may empower the commoner with a theory of heterarchy by recognizing their agency through the material culture they left behind (Lohse et al 2004). Before we can attest to the domination or relative freedom of any people, we must understand the systems of exchange, value, and production that underlie socio-political interests (Marx 1859). We must also question where authority came from: was it imposed from the outside or were group members “elected” to lead their own respective social classes (Tourtellot et. al. 2004:43)? When the latter is true, it negates the accuracy of a powerless commoner inference.

Heterarchy is a way of seeing social structures as *self-organizing*, some use the terms synonymously (Scarborough et al 2003). Scarborough et al (2003:xiv) explains heterarchy in terms of complexity

The heterarchy concept suggests that not all information or services or material exchange travels along routinized vertical pathways between members of a group. Because societal units are not structurally over-rigid or temporally stationary, much information –broadly defined– passes rapidly between and within groups. This condition allows for the kinds of flexibility necessary for culture change. Heterarchy in no way denies the significance of hierarchical organization; in fact, it is a key organizational strategy in all complex order. However, heterarchy represents a more inclusive umbrella...(and) captures the element of flexibility embedded in the functioning of any group.

They go on to explain that: (Scarborough et al 2003:xv)

It is in the informal set of interactions –that formality, recorded history, and elite control emerge. Not the other way around. Because what occurs in recorded history is at the request of a top-down viewing elite, it comes as little surprise that our principal model for complexity revolves around hierarchical order.

The ethnographic and ethnohistoric record of the Yucatan, while steeped in hierarchy, is also rich with examples of heterarchy. Individuals and trade networks defying the bounds of a top-down distribution of power or wealth are apparent in the dispersal patterns of jade at Blue Creek, and embodied ethnohistorically in persons known as *batabs*.

Evidence for Mayan Social Complexity in the Historical and Archaeological Record: Batabs
Pre-Columbian *Batabs* (pronounced batab, batabob, or baat-te) were ancient Mayan *tax collectors*,

roaming the countryside to enforce the demands and taxations of leaders upon territories in many different ways throughout the ancient and historical ages. Their status changed as colonialization changed the territories, at times they even oversaw the Roman Catholic Church's physical enforcement of social and religious values (Rugeley 1995:479).

Batabs are identified in the Late Classic Petén region by a glyph pronouncing *baat-te*, meaning headman or lord, or as an interchangeable character for the *ben-ich* glyph because of its phonetic similarity. It was primarily used to introduce kingly events (Jones 1977:34). An early example of the *batab* glyph is seen on a stela at Tikal, Guatemala (Fig. 2) introducing an act of Ruler C (Jones 1977:31). Tikal would have needed brokers to work between classes, its dense urban and rural populations maintained approximately 440 persons per square kilometer spread over an area of 193 square kilometers (120 miles) (Culbert et al 1990). Tikal has an epic arrangement of monumental architecture and a dense, restored urban core popularized by the film and tourism industries.

As Pre-Columbian members of noble patrilineages, *batabs* were given powerful “administrative and magisterial duties” (Coe 2002:197), as well as war leader positions. *Batabs* survived well beyond the collapse of the Maya control of Petén. In 1546, *batabs* were an integral part of brokering arrangements between native elites and colonial leaders. They had become tax collectors for the native elites, and quite wealthy themselves. Yucatan natives, in the times surrounding contact and conquest, enjoyed a large degree of freedom from taxation by colonial leaders, at the expense of paying tribute to their local ruling-class lords. The *batab* was a direct connection between the elite and commoner populations, over time they would become more popular than the leaders themselves. Maya elites were of little help to their own native population, actively collaborating with the Europeans they instituted a racial system of segregation with indigenous people at the base. The *batabs* stayed loyal to their people however, and by 1847 their status was powerful enough to initiate one of the most successful uprisings of a native population against European imperialism, the Caste War (Rugeley 1995:486).

Batabs walked between the lines of a temporal hierarchy. In a matter of three hundred years their role shifted from elite tax collectors to that of leaders of a commoner revolution aimed against, among many things, elite taxation. They are an example of individuals with places on different simultaneous hierarchies, participating, and at times basking in, the ebb and flow of tribal and colonial power. These agents of heterarchy exemplify the complexity of social political systems at play in the ancient and colonial Petén, as well as the humanity one expects to find in the past.

Evidence of Heterarchy in the the Archaeological Record

Political Networks at La Milpa, Belize

It could be argued that the only way to study a complex society is from the top down, the political will and desire of a leader will diffuse into all realms of social interaction. This would do well to explain many of the phenomena we see at play in today’s world, but can the ideology be applied back into prehistory? To question a site structure based on this hypothesis, we should be able to find associations of artifacts or architecture separating people based upon their status in the social system. Joyce (1994:182) suggests that the upper class will be “those who use imported or elaborate goods, consume more of these goods in life (as seen in middens) and death (as seen in burials), draw on greater energy for the construction of their living sites, and have less evidence of malnutrition or poor health.” Too often then, commoners are interpreted as the opposite, “‘small’ (versus larger-than-life-rulers often glorified in stone monuments), ‘impoverished’ (when compared to elaborate palaces and grave offerings to the high and mighty), ‘unempowered’ (in the face of elite decisions on most weighty social matters), and ‘anonymous’ (in that none are known to us by name or individual deed)” (Lohse and Valdez 2004). In a more positive light however, commoners are “viewed as adapters to their social environments, responding to economic, political, and ideological pressures exerted on them by others...they are seen as primarily responsible for engaging their surrounding biophysical environments for the production of food and many other goods” (Lohse and Valdez 2004: 3). By

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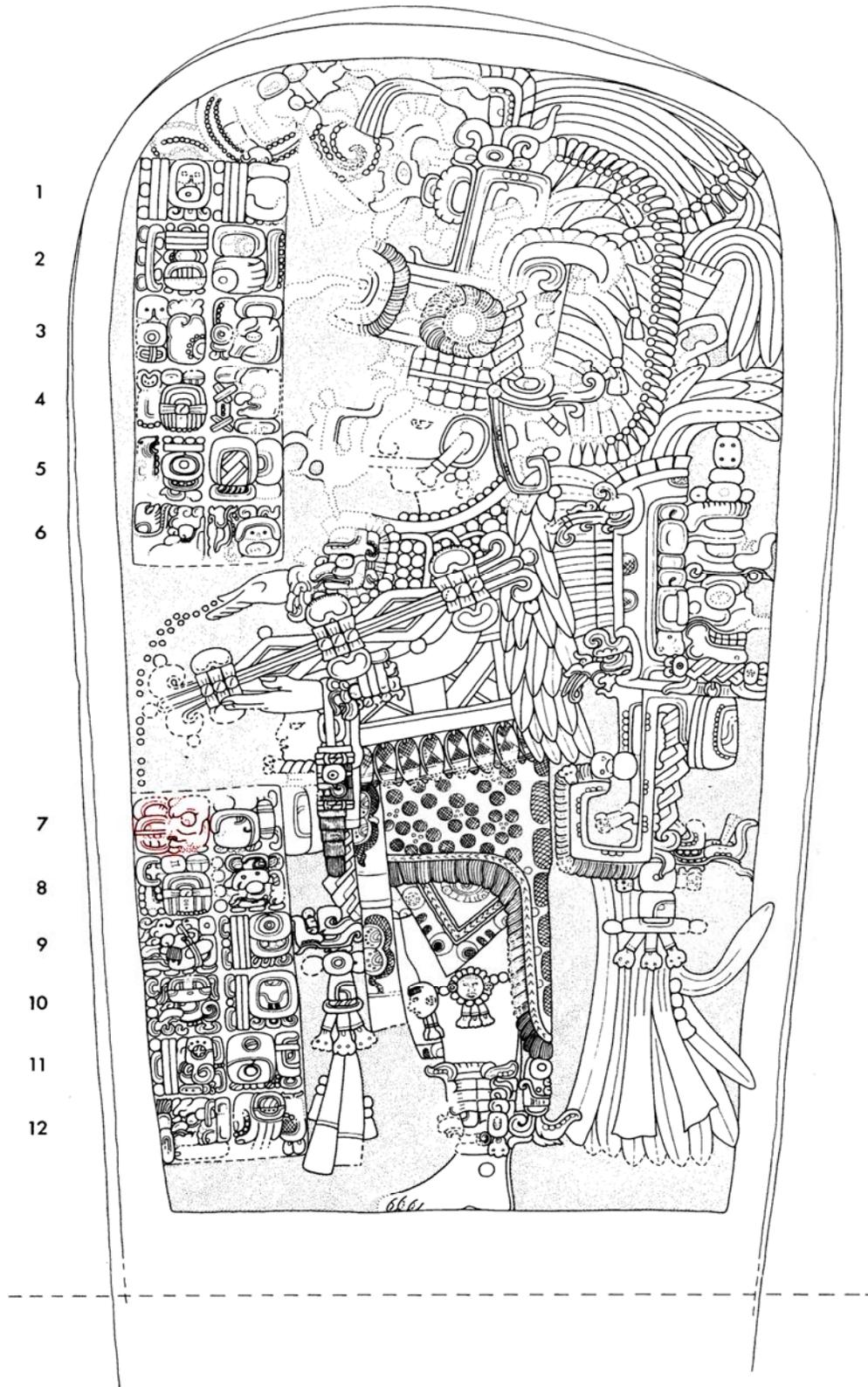


Figure 2. Stela 22 at Tikal. Batab glyph in red. (Jones 1977:31, color added)

looking at an individual's access to ritual goods, housing accommodations, commodities (food and tools), and burial, we could possibly understand their position in a social ranking. In the discussion of past behavior which accounts for archaeological deposits, dueling systems of interpretation seem quite necessary to account for people from all walks of life. Heterarchy is an exploration into the workings of commoners and their feedback into a controlling, producing, artistic society. Hierarchy more suitably explains the negative feedback imposed upon a person within a social network from above or outside their rank, or level, of individual control.

The northern Belize site of La Milpa is interpreted as a dominant tribute-collector in its region based upon its position, artifact associations and size (Tourtellot et al 2004). La Milpa offers a glimpse of a necessary hierarchical interpretation in the archaeological record. La Milpa had an estimated population of 46,000 people, its own emblem glyph (signifying rule by a particular leader, or ambassador), and a definite central palace residence (Palka 1996). Some form of political hierarchy likely controlled the production and distribution of goods in this urban region. This hierarchical form of organization is visible in many aspects of La Milpa's architectural layout. Over time, the site became more organized as its population grew and residential space disappeared. The urban population grew in clusters that allowed for sustainable city gardens, while the rural food production areas were expanded further from the city center in the direction of suitable resources. It would seem that such efficiency is not simply the product of self-organization, a central power was making decisions on how special interactions, such as growth, would occur (Tourtellot et al 2004:43). Within the city, households were arranged upon natural hills and *bajos*. The *bajos* (circular rises in elevation, shaped like a donut) appear to be populated by households from a broad range of sizes, with no controlling or imposing structures. The pyramid-like hills, however, show a division of space, with elites living in residences at their tops in larger structures, while comparatively smaller households surround their sides and base. Tourtellot et al (2004) suggest that a central authority figure would struggle to control the large population. By controlling those individuals living at the hilltops, the upper ranks of a power hierarchy could more easily dominate a large landscape. What is unknown is whether these authority figures came from within the production population as a leader of their workforce, or as an imposed figure of authority from the central kin groups ruling an area (Tourtellot et al 2004:43). A kin leader could reside with those of the population they are closest in relation to. Weber (1956), in his models of social power, suggests that a single ambitious individual or bureaucratic lineage likely arises to power in situations which are very similar to those of the urban kingship of La Milpa. Equally possible among the fluid Maya political systems though, some cities likely had rulers with a more powerful hold of the upper ranks.

The hierarchy of Maya classes was documented by early Spanish missionaries as well. Coe (2002:196-198) tells that Bishop Landa recorded accounts of a vertically ranked social system, evident in the Maya naming system. Each person had two names, from their matri and patrilineages. Both names were traceable to reveal the social power of an individual, nobles being the *almehen*, "one whose descent is known on both sides" (Coe 2002: 196). Elites were high-status warriors, scribes, farmers, traders, and priests. The elites also had a hierarchy among themselves, with an upper and lower nobility, as did the commoners. At the lowest level were the rural poor, slaves, and their descendants, taken in battle or through trade.

Wealth Distribution at Blue Creek, Belize

The ancient Maya city of Blue Creek, in northwestern Belize provides an example of a population defying the boundaries of standard Mayanist interpretations. Maya literature typically associates jade and obsidian with the elite class (Coe 2002). Blue Creek, located in the northeastern corner of the Orange Walk district of Belize bordering Mexico, does not follow this common relationship between elite status and good dispersal. Blue Creek was a rich farming community with an estimated population of 12,500 (Guderjan, In Press:a) in the Late Classic period, based on the number of residences

identified. Within the city were many large hilltop residences, commoner apartments, ancestor shrines, pyramid groups, and large amounts of jade, obsidian, shell, and fine ceramics. There is a definite public center to the site, comprised of 15 buildings complete with a pseudo E-group (four large pyramids aligned to stylistically resemble monumental arrangements such as those Tikal), ball court, central plaza, and a stucco shrine for a possible lineage founder or king (Guderjan, In Press:a). Scattered in the surrounding miles of terrain are structures suited for ruling class elites accompanied by compounds where large groups of people would inhabit. Jade dispersal at Blue Creek was highly diverse, very large numbers of jade eccentrics were found in elite burials and within monuments marking special events, but jade was also found among the burials of non-elites (Guderjan, In Press:b). Whereas one would expect to find fine jade within elite residences and burials, here they were spread throughout the population. Hundreds of pieces of finely carved jade and shell are located in some of the smaller dwellings at the site, elsewhere in the Maya regions, this jade would be enormously valuable. It seems that although the site eventually fell victim to widespread warfare from other regions, for the majority of the site's existence, residents were enjoying the benefits of abundant riches in all walks of life. Frameworks of social interaction developed which dispersed exotic trade goods like jade and Mexican obsidian. Organic goods such as food crops, salt, and cacao also existed throughout the Blue Creek territory (Guderjan, In Press:a). Beach and Luddazer-Beach's (2004) phytolith analysis at Blue Creek reveal the presence of high quantities of squash, cacao, maize, plantillo, beans, chico sapote, and Panicoid grass used for thatching (Guderjan, In Press:a:8). Jade and obsidian artifacts recovered at Blue Creek are material evidence suggesting a high degree of interaction among the ancient Maya population (Guderjan et al 2003). Guderjan (In Press:a:19) summarizes the importance of an in-depth study of a relatively small ancient Maya city:

The data from Blue Creek demonstrate that ancient Maya cities had complex agricultural economic bases that incorporated risk managed intensive agriculture. More importantly, the Blue Creek information enhances our understanding of the larger scale geo-political and economic interaction among Maya polities. Blue Creek clearly produced agricultural products in excess of local consumption. Blue Creek displays a pattern of conspicuous consumption of exotic, status reinforcing goods and other public displays of wealth. This wealth and the import of such goods was made possible by Blue Creek's setting in the Maya "bread basket" and its location at the terminus of the riverine trade system.

The highest occurrences of jade at Blue Creek are located in public monuments, deposited in caches for dedication and termination events. Although the elite residences had larger numbers of higher quality jade, than those of non-elites, the fact remains that non-elites had access to jade for some of their burials. Guderjan (In Press:b) has interpreted these jade deposits as a type of currency, with non-elites being given special tokens of appreciation from their leaders.

Ceramic Production at K'axob, Belize

Varela, McAnany, and Berry (2001), in their examination of ceramic production among the Late Classic Maya in K'axob, Belize, set out to compile "the most comprehensive information presented to date on the technology of ancient Maya pottery fabrication and firing" (Varela et al 2001:177). They have accomplished this goal by examining one of the few known Maya pottery firing facilities by analyzing ceramic production, use, manipulation, and discard. Informed by Schiffer and Skibo (1989), Skibo (1992), and Porr (1999), their research methods "stress archaeometric, use-wear, and replicative techniques...[which] are essential to identifying human decisions that underlie the cultural dimension of pottery production" (Varela et al 2001:179).

K'axob is located in northeastern Belize, about 60 km upriver from the large ancient city of

Lamanai. It was occupied from the Classic period through the Postclassic (250 A.D. - 1500 A.D.). The kiln feature was discovered underlying a pit burial of an adult male. The firing of ceramics in the kiln had ceased prior to the burial. Varela et al argue that kilns and production facilities have not been located because of the historical tradition in Maya archaeology that focuses too much attention on elite structures and burials, while ignoring smaller locales where the vast majority of the population interact. Structure 89, where the kiln was found, is no exception. It lies outside of a relatively small complex of elite structures, and appeared to sit atop a rise in the bedrock. It was explored initially in an attempt to record a nearby midden. According to Varela et al (2001:181):

Extensive excavation revealed three pits, in line going upslope from east to west, interconnected by tubes...The central pit was the largest and deepest, and with its neighbor to the east formed the single dumbbell-shaped hole that served as a grave. The central pit was connected to its neighbors by tubes (carved from the bedrock) that entered each pit near its base. The base of the easternmost pit is ca. 10 cm lower than the base of the central and westernmost pits. The diameter of the tubes range from 10 to 16 cm and the distance between the pits is 40 cm.

Ceramic firing at this facility continued over a long period of time, as pottery making continues through all three phases of construction. Another two-chambered kiln was found overlying the complex, and a patio area was defined where pottery working took place. Pottery working tools were found in the area, along with obsidian blades.

Because known Mesoamerican kilns are few in number, and none with tubing have been located in the Maya region, the authors chose to do a comparative study with a similar system of ceramic manufacture at the Formative Period Moche site of Batan Grande. The Moche commonly dug double chambered dumbbell shaped kilns, around 60 cm in diameter. This led the authors to propose that what appear to be triple-chambered kilns, are in fact double-chambered kilns with a chimney. A round pit containing charred rocks was also similar to single chamber kilns at Batan Grande. Experimental testing revealed a thermal shock resistance advantage in the roughened chamber walls. Ethnographic studies of potters in Atzompa, Mexico, showed that as the needs of a family changed over time, the layout of their ceramic production areas changed accordingly. Increased production, or changing domestic spatial needs could account for the two construction phases, which alter and reorganize production techniques via a new patio workspace and the addition of new kilns. Ethnographic studies also reveal that nine heavily worn ceramic blocks recovered in phase two were similar to blocks used to control firing temperature among modern Mexican potters. Changing ceramic output types were also recorded through time. Several jar types and figurine fragments denote diversification of production during phase two.

An abundance of pottery working tools were found throughout phase two. These include several utilized sherds in diamond, triangle, pentagonal, and quadrilateral forms. The range of pottery working tools made from sherds at K'axob is the greatest in Mesoamerica; their edges have been shaped in ways unseen in the archaeological record, yet are similar to some modern potters' tools. Use-wear analysis was conducted on 121 sherds from K'axob, revealing alteration into clay-working implements such as incisors, borers, smoothers and polishers (Varela et al 2001:186). Potters selected the specific types of ceramics from which to shape their tools based on performance characteristics of the original vessels. The potters preferred clays that had strong impact and abrasion resistance. Tools were shaped to match the needs of particular vessel shapes and finishes. The ceramic sherd tools were replicated, and the archaeologists successfully recreated five Late Classic style bowls. The process was of the same efficiency as if modern pottery-working tools had been used.

The kilns of K'axob were likely utilized for 100-200 years during the Late Classic period. The behavioral approach suited the study of this site, because multiple lines of evidence were being

investigated, and the product of the kilns could be replicated. By studying clay chemistry, use-wear, re-use, formation processes, experimental re-creations, production, discard, and ethnographic reports of pottery workshops and households, the authors present a strong argument for their analysis of K'axob, which reveals the workings of previously unknown manufacturing facilities. It also reveals the control and contribution that non-elites had upon the power of production in ancient Mesoamerica.

Gender in the Ashes: Households, Wealth Distribution, and Gender at Cerén, El Salvador.

On an August night around A.D. 590 just following dinner and preceding the unfolding of their rolled sleeping mats, residents of a small Mesoamerican village fled from their homes as a devastating volcano erupted beneath their feet. The blast was so quick and powerful that no time was left to gather their possessions. Dirty dishes would never be cleaned and bountiful household gardens never again harvested. The artifacts would sit where they fell for some 1400 years, until in 1976 a bulldozer unearthed the first glimpse of a nearly complete Late Classic Maya village site, occupied by non-elites. So well preserved was Cerén that it was originally believed to be of recent antiquity. The local museum couldn't imagine that the straw roofs and earthquake-resistant construction were anywhere near 14 centuries old. By chance Payson Sheets heard of the find through the local villagers and had a sample of thatch roofing carbon-dated, he would work at the site for the next thirty years. (Sheets 1992)

Cerén offers outstanding potential for exploring questions about the lives of Ancient Maya commoners, due to its near perfect preservation. The heat and ash preserved material culture related to wealth distribution, space utilization, gender, and village power. The interpretation that follows is based upon Hastorf's (1991) findings-that gender is a production of family relations, divisions of labor, and access to goods. Aspects of gender "are created from cultural ideas and cultural symbols that are seen in the use and placement of material items in space within the residential house" (Hastorf 1991: 133). As suggested by Brumfiel (1992), I focus attention to the actors involved with creating the site layout and their individual roles as village citizens. Of particular abundance at Cerén are food remains, food serving and storage vessels, and a plethora of discarded food-production debitage. Food production and distribution are known as cultural status indicators (Brumfiel 1991, Hastorf 1991, Scott 2001: 671, Szuter 2000), thus the household material remains at Cerén also answer important questions of prehistoric power distribution within small communal groups, revealing some of the social heterarchy at play in Ancient Mesoamerica.

Sheets carried out excavations at Cerén using the investigative methods of behavioral and household archaeology, in meticulous recorded detail. His efforts successfully communicate all desired aspects of the site and artifact layouts, yet leave qualitative interpretations of the remains and their social context loosely described. This allows readers from a number of theoretical schools to interpret the site. I've interpreted places within Cerén where distinct male or female activities were taking place at the time of Laguna Caldera's eruption, basing my inferences on artifact assemblages, ethnographic, and ethnohistoric accounts of more recent Central American Indigenous peoples.

The Laguna Caldera Volcano formed in the late 6th century (590 A.D. +/- 90 years), about two kilometers from the village of Cerén. Its steam surge traveled at 50-200 kilometers per hour, followed by the deposition of 20 square kilometers of debris, quickly burying the surrounding area under 5 meters of volcanic ash in a series of 14 eruption phases (Sheets 1992). The first expulsion was a searing, moist cloud of fine-grained tephra ash, which instantly engulfed and preserved 20-30 centimeters of lived space. In this layer plaster casts of ethnobotanicals can be taken, preserving them in a method made famous with the human figure-casts at Pompeii. The blast also preserved charred remains of a many locally utilized organic materials. Remains of nearly every aspect of the residents' material lives; from stored maize, beans, peppers and paints, to fences corded with agave fiber have been preserved in this first layer of ash, many times in situ. Unfortunately, subsequent surges involving downpours of huge lava-bombs disturbed some of the pristine archaeology. Most structures have one or two large impact craters, that on occasion shattered roofs, pottery, walls and flooring, as well as setting

fire to some organic material.

The village of Cerén bordered the Maya Stronghold of San Andres, which lies roughly five kilometers northwest. Black (1983:82) suggests that there were 40,000-100,000 people living in the Zapotitan Valley in this time period, and Sheets (1992:11) notes that the San Andres political hierarchy likely controlled the village.

The highlight of the site of Cerén lies in its dense aggregation of artifacts reflecting daily life. No more important structure exists for daily sustenance than the household kitchen. Structure 11 (the kitchen of household 1) holds a combination of several female-controlled technologies: a three-stone hearth, abundant storage vessels, grinding stones, and ritual artifacts. Occupants entered the round kitchen via its front porch, inside they would have been surrounded by objects of various uses. Hematite stored in containers could have been used for crafts. A number of cooking pots ranging in size from small to large were available for cooking. Storage vessels containing chilies, squash seeds, corn, and several types of beans would supply the needed ingredients for local cuisine. The lack of any griddles at the site suggests that residents ate tamales as opposed to tortillas (Beaudry-Corbett and Bishop 2002). The kitchen served a house that had an overabundance of small cotton spindle whorls, five maize processing metates, and hammerstones, both complete and incomplete in manufacture (Beaudry-Corbett et al. 2002). Incomplete equipment could be completed and traded to supplement the family income, and the aggregation of spindle whorls denote that weaving was taking place.

The house's center hearth was being used at or near the time of abandonment, as the ashes had not yet been collected. Wood ashes were mixed with corn at Cerén in the same way that lime is now used, to add extra nutrients through the niacin released during an overnight soaking. Ash-soaked corn, paired in a meal with beans and squash contain all of the essential nutrients for human survival. The wood ash is also known ethnographically for use as food seasoning, in soap production, and in the preparation of plant fibers for spinning (McKee 2002: 67-68). Every structure with a hearth had at least one vessel for collecting the prized wood ashes, some structures had large collections of them. We know that much time was spent grinding corn in this kitchen from the nearly complete wear on one of the two metates. Ethnographic reports show that prior to the availability of mechanized mills, women in Central America typically spent six to eight hours a day grinding at a metate (Brumfiel 1991:238). Also present in the kitchen was a recently used *incensario*, which denotes that the inhabitant was burning resin while they cooked, perhaps *pom* (copal incense). It appears that the kitchen was ready for a meal to be prepared, within a meter of the hearth lie: a large serving bowl, two polychrome serving bowls and a serving gourd, three medium sized jars containing organic materials and seeds, a trough metate with mano, two discarded gourds (probably hung from the ceiling), and a large pile of corn, surrounded by three very large storage vessels. Behind the large storage vessels were two more polychrome serving bowls and another gourd. One meter south lay a shelf area surrounded by more useful objects: a greenstone celt (an axe-head shaped tool used for chopping), a large storage basket, bundles of hanging dried chilies and a vessel of chili seeds, another large jar of seeds, and a polychrome tripod bowl. Brumfiel notes that ethnographically, tripod mortars were used by women for preparing moles (1991:238), the kitchen had all of the available ingredients to prepare modern derivatives of this common dish (beans, chilies, and gourd seeds), except tomatoes. All of the ingredients for atole are also present except for a sweet component, which would have been available through local trade, as beeswax was found in another storehouse (structure 4), which I believe denotes access to honey. Honey could have been stored in one of the two liquid-holding handled vessels. A number of rodent skeletons living in the kitchen rafters show that animals were attracted to the abundant food stuffs, these rodents could have been snared to finish a meal, adding a tasty protein component. Despite the rodents, both the kitchen and household were kept clear of refuse, and would have appeared to be very clean and well-maintained (Beaudry-Corbett 2002:55).

Through the manufacture and trade of spun fiber products, hammerstones, ground maize, and maize grinding equipment, the residents of household 1 were accumulating wealth and sustaining their family.

If ethnographic and ethnohistoric findings linking spindle whorls and metates to female occupation (Brumfiel 1991) are projected backward upon Cerén residents, we see that women were present and working for the family living at household 1, perhaps earning the entire household income.

Where were the men of Cerén? They could have been out working a local household garden or milpa, such as one outlying household two. Contrasting ethnographic reports depict Maya men working the milpas in some regions, and women in others (Burns 1983; Re Cruz 1996). Household two is not completely excavated. As of 2002, two structures and the surrounding garden and midden have been recovered. The domicile of household 2 is in much better condition than HH1. The construction is very similar to modern Maya houses (McKee 2002: 60), being composed of bajareque walls (large timbers covered with clay), four adobe columns, and a grass-hatch roof held together by agave fiber, all sitting upon a substantial 80cm thick fired-adobe floor. Recycled pottery handles are set in the walls for hanging things, modern Maya use these to hang their hats and attach hammocks. Doors were hung on the inset ceramic handles at Cerén. The roof designs of Cerén are very interesting, in that on average their exterior covered surface area is double the inner surface area, providing paths between buildings, comfortable areas to work in the rain, eat corn on the cob, and enjoy the cool evening air.

Although men may have possibly been outside tending the milpa, material evidence of definite female activity is located inside household two. An intact wall-niche was found in HH2 containing a bivalve shell fragment, painted gourd, Gualpopa bowl, and Copador tripod bowl with an upside down Copador bowl atop it. The Copador bowl is one of the famous Cerén dirty dishes, as it had finger swipes of food residue lining its interior. This and other details combine to form the picture of a hasty abandonment, just following a meal. Also in the niche was a tiny fragment of a decomposed codex. On a bench in the room was a tripod incensario, which are widely known for their ritual uses involving the burning of resin incenses. As was common of most blades found at Cerén, stored in the rafters of HH2 were two prismatic obsidian blades. The blades' were deposited on rafters and within fallen grass-thatch debris, the extremely sharp blades would have been dangerous if stored on the floor or out in the open, especially if children were playing in the area. Also found was a discarded ground sherd spindle whorl.

A meter south of the domicile was the household storage building, which had recently been remodeled. The storehouse contained several vessels used to store organic items, many of which were decomposed beyond identification. Also present was a lump of specular hematite, notable because other households were mixing mica and hematite to make theirs appear specular. Fragments of red pigment and five small cinnabar storage vessels were found, along with seven jadeite beads. Prepared limonite and hematite, and disk-shaped shell pendants accompanied a star-incised shell bead (McKee 2002: 67). Also found in this structure of gendered importance was a carved coyol palm endocarp whorl, a figurine carved from mammal bone, two wood-ash storage vessels, and a number of polychrome food presentation ceramic vessels. Under the eaves surrounding the storehouse another number of items were recovered: a bone needle fragment, many corn cobs which Sheets cast in dental plaster, several bowls that were destroyed during the eruption, two grinding manos, and a cylinder of hematite which had been used to paint one of the outer storehouse walls red. Foot traffic was heavy through the covered areas surrounding the storehouse, resulting in the trampling of ground artifacts and two plaster-cast footprints. The storehouse denotes activities of craft production, probably by a female actor. She would have been storing dishes and valuable craft materials, which show ethnographic associations of female gendered activity.

The large ~30 x ~4 meter milpa of HH2 was solely used for the production of corn. Maize was highly productive at Cerén, Sheets estimates that 5,850 kg were produced per hectare (Sheets and Woodward 2002: 186). Although HH1 & HH3 also had milpas, their agricultural production was much more varied. Found in high concentrations were cacao and guayaba trees, maguey, and chile plants. Beans were stored in conglomerations of several species, and were planted in mixed-species rows. The agave (maguey) gardens of HH3 contained 70 plants, from which more than enough fiber could have

been produced for 14 households (Sheets and Woodward 2002: 188). In addition to these staple crops were several "kitchen gardens", where the most abundant biodiversity can be found. In the kitchen gardens were: piñuela, macoya, cebadilla (used as a stomach-ache medicine, perhaps from drinking too much atole de piñuela), manioc (yucca/cassava), palm trees, and xanthosoma. All were grown on ridges in a relatively organized manner. The amount of work necessary to run these home gardens and milpas would have been substantial, but the rewards would have been a life of plenty in terms of both material possessions and access to nutritious foods. Whoever tended the gardens at Cerén had a master-knowledge of local agricultural methods and was working hard to maintain the spaces.

Due to the large amounts of agave and corn being produced at Cerén, it could have been assumed that a large workshop existed somewhere to process the abundant commodities. Adjacent to hypothesized household 4, this structure was located. Inside the large building was a granary full of husked corn on the cob, as well as an area for depulping agave plants, and processing cotton seeds (to extract their oil). Also found were four containers of cacao and various obsidian blade tools. Possibly female gendered items include: polychrome food-serving vessels, a metate, bone needles, an incensario, and fourteen gourds of wood ash. Among the serving vessels were two polychrome tripod plates (Gerstle and Sheets 2002: 78), possibly used to serve the tamales I eluded to earlier. A room to the south of the workshop had recently been the serving place of a meal, as a variety of dirty dishes were still placed on a mat in the room. It is possible that this storehouse was also a domicile, it contained all of the normal artifacts of other Cerénian households.

Structure 12 at Cerén holds the most potential for being a female-gendered building. The building itself is unlike any other at Cerén, being of a distinct architecture and cardinal alignment. It is also the highest in elevation, and the easternmost location on site. It was painted white with horizontal decorative elements of three-lobed red floral designs repeated three times, today the Maya still regard the colors white and red as being of sacred importance (Becom and Aberg 1997: 90), for use on churches. The building was massive and had a room for each cardinal direction, with a network of strange floor elevations, low doorway lintels, four vertical niches (the only vertical niches at Cerén), latticed windows (the only windows at Cerén), and elevated catacombs connecting the rooms. Within this structure are several specifically female artifacts: two spindle whorls, two manos, a metate, marine shells, wood ash gourds, and a ceramic figurine with female body parts. The structure's shamanic collection includes: a deer antler, two piles of beans, obsidian blade fragments, two vessels likely used to store chicha, seashells, and a horde of heavily worn objects of heirloom-like importance (an animal head figurine painted white, a broken ceramic ring, many other broken/discarded items with no intrinsic or use value).

It seems likely that the shaman operating in this building was of high status locally. She had patrons leaving personal objects, and a prominent building designed for specific ritual needs. As the volcano erupted, she probably grabbed her crystals and ran, leaving the intriguing mess of ritual debris that comprises structure 12 behind.

The aspects of Cerén that I've chosen to examine make up a tiny fraction of the actual archaeology. Accepting my examination of some of these spaces and artifacts, it seems likely that dual gender subcultures existed within the village, and that inhabitants had a high quality of living. The male and female subcultures were not dominating each other, nor were they necessarily reliant on an outside political hierarchy to meet their needs. No one lived like a slave at the site, as attested to by the quaintly painted houses, open-air workspaces, modestly-sized gardens, and well maintained, covered traffic areas. Clearly the Mayan residents' spaces in Cerén paint a picture of prosperity in the ancient world.

Implications of Theories of Power Upon Archaeological Interpretations

Anthropology informs that vast differences may exist among people of neighboring regions. To complicate the matter, dramatically different views of life may exist within seemingly mono-cultural societies. I imagine these diversities can be explained when studying the social networks within a group

of interacting peoples. Many ways of life, viewpoints, and social structures existed door to door prehistorically. The term hierarchy does not adequately explain these complex prehistoric networks, nor does it begin to explain the life of a commoner. A single vertical power stratification does not tie one person to another within any given region. Heterarchy allows for multiple interpretations of site-linkages, particularly when nearby sites exhibit different social networks or patterns of behavior in the archaeological records.

In my research, I have applied a theory of heterarchy, to several Maya sites. I found clear evidence of complex political networks operating at the site of La Milpa, Belize, by exploring residential space distribution and change over time, and at Blue Creek Belize, where the commoners maintained collections of exotic goods such as jade, shell, and obsidian. These goods are always associated with elites in classic Maya literature, and their ownership by commoners at Blue Creek forces one to rethink assumptions about ancient life in Mesoamerica.

At the site of K'axob Belize, I examined behavioral archaeologists' excavations of one of few known Mayan pottery kilns. With a focus on the power of production, K'axob exemplifies the control commoners had over their own economy, through their input into local production and trade. The site is also a testimony to the rigorous excavation techniques of North American behavioral archaeologists, as their work not only revealed and recreated an ancient kiln, but the archaeologists also discovered that pottery waste sherds had been utilized by the ancient Maya as pottery making tools. When their work was done, the researchers had not only excavated a rare Maya kiln, they had recreated Late Classic Pottery in perfect proportions, essentially rediscovering a lost technology.

Finally, at Cerén, El Salvador, a day in the life of a Late Classic village was preserved by a violent pompeiiian eruption from the Laguna Caldera volcano in 490 A.D. There, the rich daily life of commoners was recorded in extreme detail. In an interpretation of the site focused on gender roles and production, I reveal a fairly egalitarian distribution of commodities, power and access to space, by correlating the archaeologists' finds with ethnographic and ethnohistoric accounts of more recent Maya commoners. Using accounts of Spanish Conquistadors regarding the artifacts associated with female gendered activity, I also argue that a female shaman potentially was acting as the center of social and economic power at the village. Most importantly for the legacy of the commoner, Cerén speaks to the large degree of freedom and high quality of life among commoners, which is not typically revealed in hierarchically-framed excavations.

My interpretations of these sites allows researchers to see that the archaeologist's theoretical framework always informs both the questions we ask and those we exclude, knowingly or unknowingly. The theoretical framework guides the choice of excavation sites, the methods used to excavate, and in turn, the data collection. Therefore, by extending the framework to include questions concerning commoners, we alter the entire structure of data collection and interpretation in the Petén, or wherever a group of people have vanished from the records of our modern world.

Notes

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1. A similar argument has been made regarding the use of "culture" to refer to a group of people. In *Writing Against Culture*, Abu-Lughod (1991) argues that the anthropological use of *culture* has facilitated over-generalizations and the exoticization of anthropology's "others" such that ethnographic accounts represent living people as ahistorical representatives of some defined culture/ethnic group. Abu-Lughod argues that in ethnographic writing, these overgeneralizations can be overcome, in part, by speaking of the lived experience of people.

2. Image generated using NASA Worldwind Aerial Photography Software, thanks to NASA's generous free academic-use licensing policy.

3. It should be noted that coming into this research I carried the burden of a hypothesis: that social interaction should be interpreted heterarchically. A knowledge of immense social complexity emerges in the anthropological mind that is hard to silence. Having broken one of the most important of Carl Sagan's (1996: 201-218) rules for scientists regarding the avoidance of pet hypothesis, another goal of this paper is to better relay the arguments for a hierarchical framework of ancient power structures.

4. The title of this essay is a play on the title of a monograph that was important to the structuring of my argument: *Heterarchy, Political Economy, and the Ancient Maya* (Scarborough et al 2003).

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