
25 **RECENT ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND EPIGRAPHIC RESEARCH AT PUSILHA, BELIZE: REPORT ON THE 2001 AND 2002 FIELD SEASONS**

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The ancient city of Pusilha, located in the extreme southern corner of Toledo District, was one of the first Maya sites in Belize to be subject to intensive archaeological exploration. Early investigators discovered more than 20 stelae, zoomorphic altars, and ceramics that suggested strong ties with Copan and Quirigua. More recently, it has been suggested that Pusilha – like Quirigua – was incorporated briefly as province in an expanding Copan State. The Pusilha Archaeological Project, now in its third season, is investigating this possibility from both archaeological and epigraphic perspectives.

Introduction

Pusilha is located in southwestern Belize, just east of the Guatemalan border and about 30 km from Modesto Mendez and San Luis Peten, Guatemala (Figure 1). Although Lubaantun and Nim Li Punit, two other sites located in Toledo District, have been subject to more intense archaeological investigation, there can be little doubt that Pusilha was the largest and politically dominant city of the region throughout much of the Classic period. Since the rediscovery of Pusilha in the late 1920s (Gruning 1930, 1931; Joyce 1929; Joyce et al. 1928; Morley 1938), a connection of some sort has been posited between the site and Copan and Quirigua. Evidence for this connection consists of a shared tradition of carved-in-the-round zoomorphic altars, similarities between the Pusilha and Quirigua emblem glyphs, apparent references in Pusilha texts to one or possibly two important kings of Copan, and parallels between the political trajectories of Pusilha and Quirigua.

These similarities have led Marcus (1992, 1994) to suggest that Pusilha began as an independent polity in the Early Classic period, was annexed by Copan (perhaps during the lifetime of that site's dynastic founder K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo' [Marcus

2003:95]), and reasserted its independence at the death of Copan Ruler 13, the famed Waxaklajun Ub'ah K'awil. In sum, Marcus sees this cycle of events as an example of her Dynamic Model. Alternatively, during the 7th century, Pusilha may have fallen within the political orbit of Copan – and indirectly of Tikal – as suggested by Martin and Grube (2000). Finally, as we now suspect, Pusilha may have always been an autonomous polity whose external cultural and economic ties shifted between the Copan and Quirigua region, the Rio Pasion and Petexbatun regions, and western Belize.

The goal of the Pusilha Archaeological Project, which has completed two seasons of investigation, is to examine a small polity located in a peripheral area between much larger neighbors. The specific aims of our project are: (1) to develop a more complete understanding of the political history of Pusilha through a thorough study of the site's hieroglyphic texts; (2) to test opposing political models – particularly Marcus' Dynamic Model and Martin and Grube's hegemonic “superstate” model – using hieroglyphic evidence; and (3) to investigate the economic consequences of these political events on both commoners and elites at Pusilha.

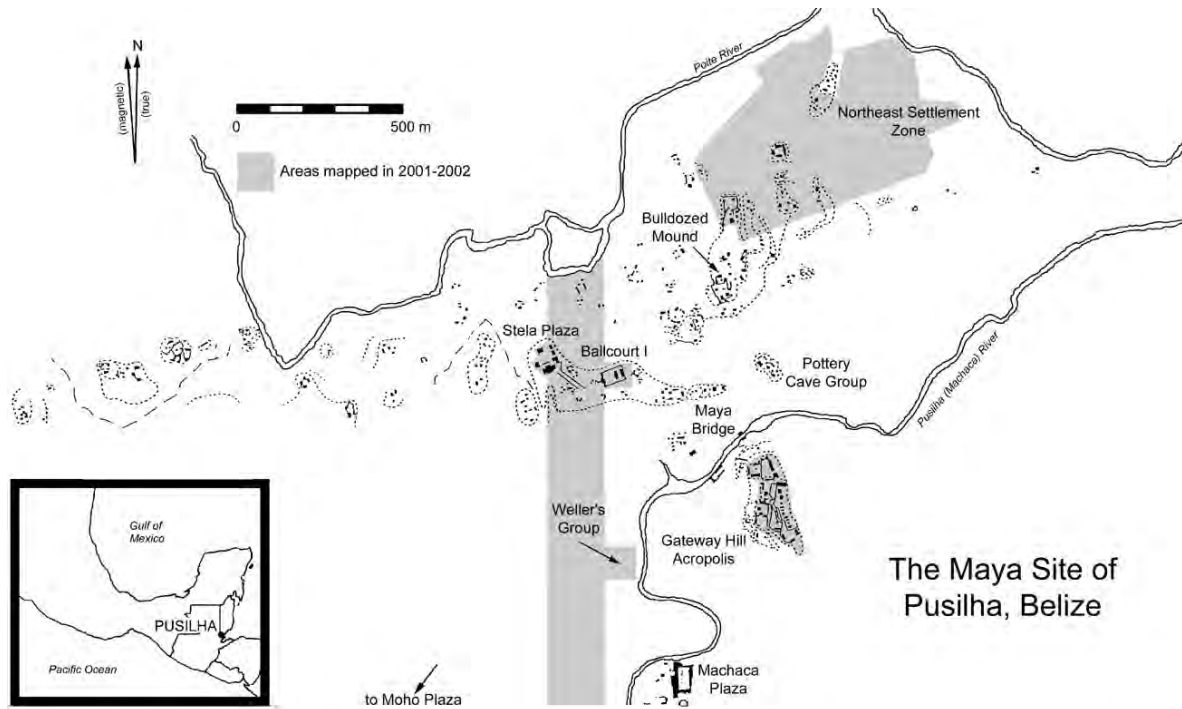


Figure 1. The Maya site of Pusilha, Belize (based on Leventhal 1990:Figure 8.1).

The 2001 and 2002 Field Seasons

Our research program consists of five components: (1) systematic mapping of the entire 6-9 km² site; (2) test pit and salvage excavations; (3) architectural consolidation; (4) artifact analysis; and (5) epigraphic and iconographic analysis of the 46 carved monuments and monument fragments known from Pusilha.

Settlement Studies

Thus far, our mapping has focused on four known architectural groups: (1) the Stela Plaza, where most of the hieroglyphic monuments were once located; (2) Ballcourt I; (3) Moho Plaza, a large outlying group containing a hieroglyphic stair and two of the four ballcourts known at the site; and (4) the Gateway Hill Acropolis, which was the royal dynastic center of the site. We also began systematic full-coverage survey in an area that we refer to as the Northeast Settlement Zone, and surveyed a 200-m wide by 1.5 km

long transect between the Machaca and Poite rivers.

Stela Plaza.

Before our first season, Prager, our Project Epigrapher, visited the British Museum and redrew both the texts and pictorial content of all the monuments brought to London in 1930 and 1931. Prager's initial assessment was that at least 20 fragments carrying inscriptions were missing. Since the stelae were found and cut up *in situ*, these fragments presumably were left by the British Museum project in the Stela Plaza. Our work in the Stela Plaza began with vegetation clearing for detailed mapping not only of structures, but also of remaining monument fragments. In the course of three weeks, we located 88 monument fragments and plotted the position of each (Figure 2). Currently, we are analyzing their depositional pattern in order to determine to which of the previously

known 21 stelae, three zoomorphic altars, and an unknown quantity of round altars the fragments belong. Each carved fragment has been illustrated and many have been photographed in both natural and oblique-angle artificial light. We are now beginning the painstaking work of comparing these illustrations with drawings and photographs of incomplete monuments in the British Museum.

The Stela Plaza is connected by a *sacbe* to Ballcourt I (Figure 3). Near the middle of the *sacbe* are several smaller architectural groups that appear to be residential in character. Together, these portions of the site center exemplify cosmological concepts of site planning described by Wendy Ashmore (1991). The Stela Group itself is linked conceptually to the north, the sun at its zenith, the heavens, and the veneration of divine royal ancestors through the stela cult. The Ballcourt is located to the south (actually southeast), and is associated with the ballgame, the underworld, darkness, the sun at night, and death. Thus the *sacbe*, like the world tree, symbolically connects the underworld to the heavens and passes through a residential zone that may symbolize our own world.

Moho Plaza.

Another focus of both mapping and monument documentation is the Moho Plaza, located 2 km southwest of the Stela Plaza. With the exception of the Gateway Hill Acropolis, this is the largest single group yet found at the site, measuring some 120 m to a side (Figure 4). The largest ballcourt known in southern Belize is located at the north end of Moho Plaza, and the south end is delimited by a large range structure containing a hieroglyphic stair. We believe that the calendar round date that dedicates the stair and structure – 4 Ak'b'al 2 Sotz' – corresponds to 9.18.7.10.3, or A.D. 798. Our working hypothesis is that this elite group

was occupied at the end of the history of Pusilha, possibly at a time after the dynastic collapse. Artifacts recovered from test pits placed behind mounds and in off-plaza contexts during our 2002 season are allowing us to evaluate the hypothesis that Moho Plaza was extensively occupied during the Terminal Classic period.

Gateway Hill Acropolis.

The dynastic center and palace complex of Pusilha, called the Gateway Hill Acropolis, also was mapped during the 2001 field season (Figure 6). The acropolis is much larger and more complex than previously thought, and entirely fills the oxbow in which Gateway Hill is located. In all, it rises some 70 m above the river in a series of terraces containing stone platforms. Figure 6 displays the terraces and pyramidal mounds that constitute the center of the acropolis. Detailed, scaled plans have been made of the features forming the rest of the complex, but the architecture and topography remain to be surveyed by total station.

Northeast Settlement Zone.

A particularly important facet of our first season was the beginning of systematic mapping. Full-coverage mapping (including detailed topographic mapping) was conducted in the three groups already described, as well as in a portion of the northeastern quadrant of the site. This last area, measuring 33 hectares in size, was completely cleared when a *milpa* fire burned out of control. The area was covered by Leventhal's (1990:Figure 8.1) transects, but the fire exposed many more groups that do not appear in his pace-and-compass map. Although the older map shows 25 structures, we mapped 84 (for a density of 255/km²) and many terrace features (Figure 7). The structure density implies a population density of approximately 1,300 people/km². The significance of this find is that the

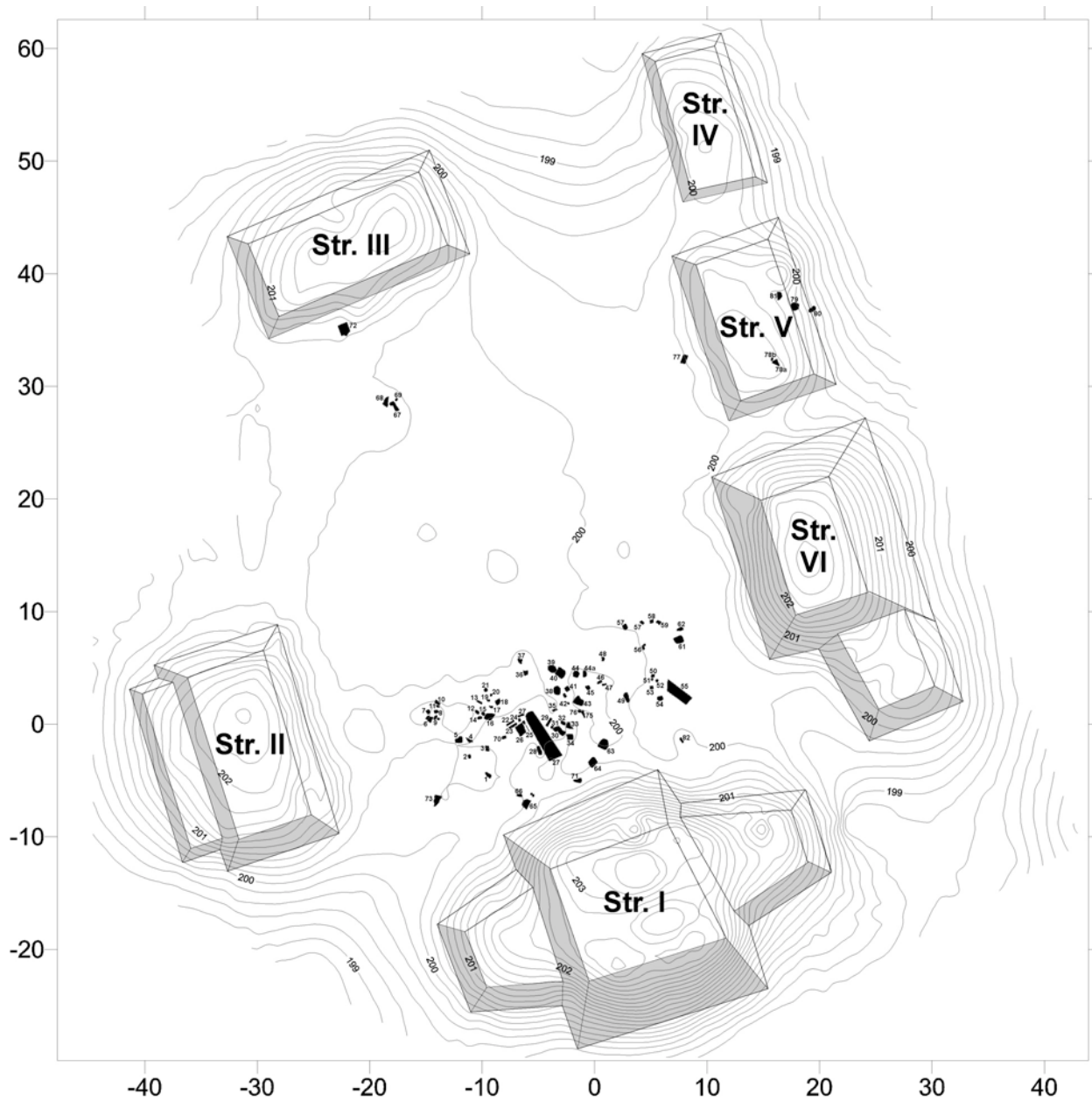


Figure 2. Stela Plaza, showing location of *in situ* monument fragments.

northeast settlement zone is well within the site center, and that the urban area of Pusilha is larger than once thought.

In 2002, we also surveyed a north-south transect measuring 200 m across by 1.5 km in length. The transect passes through the Stela Plaza, and runs to both the Poite and

Machaca rivers. In all, 93 mounds and 41 terrace features were found in this 0.3 km² survey area, for an overall density of 310 structures/km² and 140 terraces/km². The density of structures is greatest on natural ridge tops, but also is high within 100 m of either river.

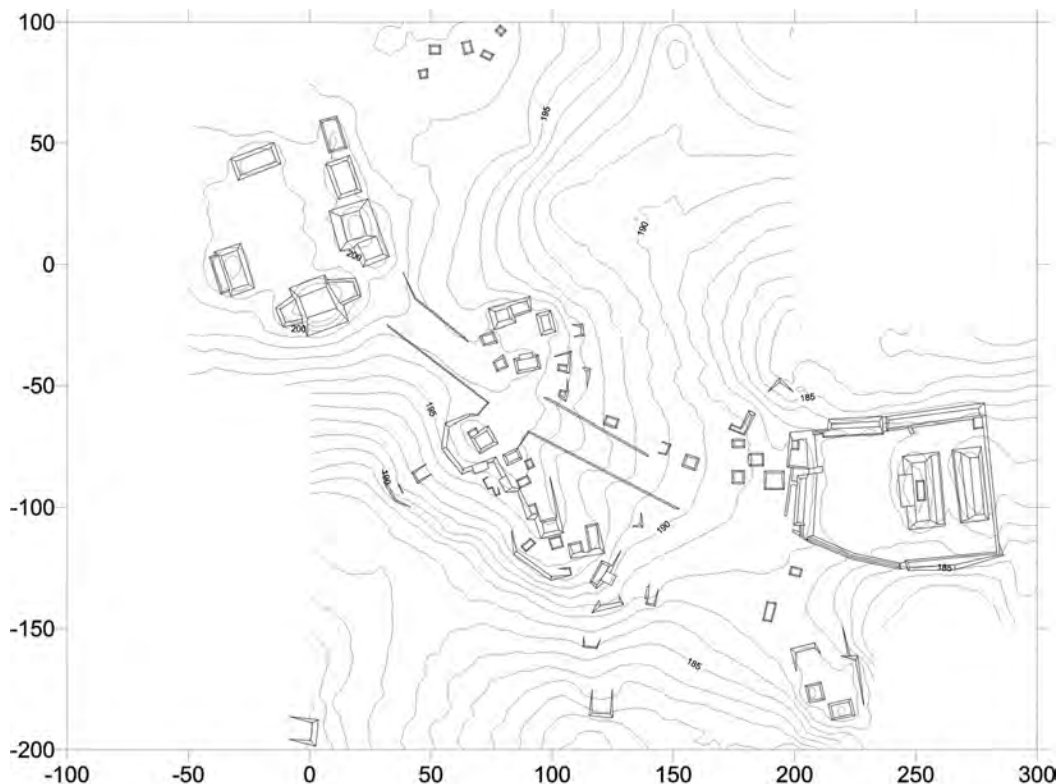


Figure 3. Stela Plaza (upper left) and Ballcourt I (lower right).

The purpose of our settlement survey is to understand the spatial distribution of elites and commoners in Pusilha, and to determine how the site grew over time. We are using the results of survey to plan test-pitting operations for the 2004 season, with the goal of sampling residential and special-function groups occupied by different segments of the population throughout the history of the site.

Excavations

During the 2002 field season, a total of 24 test pits and several extensions were excavated in off-mound, non-architectural contexts in the Stela Plaza, the Moho Plaza, a residential group that we have dubbed Weller's Plaza, and below the Pottery Cave Group. Sherds recovered from these contexts

have allowed us to build the first multi-phase ceramic chronology for an inland site in Toledo District. Pottery and other artifacts are also providing us with insights regarding the function of various groups. For example, samples from the Pottery Cave Group, Weller's Group, and an excavated mound that we call the Bulldozed Structure, all contain a wide range of cooking and storage vessels, as well as copious amounts of *jute* shell and animal bone. The assemblages, therefore, suggest to us that these three groups were largely residential in character. In contrast, many more incense burners and far fewer cooking and storage vessels – as well as almost no *jute* or animal bone – were recovered from test pits in the Stela Plaza and Moho Plaza. We suspect, therefore, that these two groups were largely ceremonial in

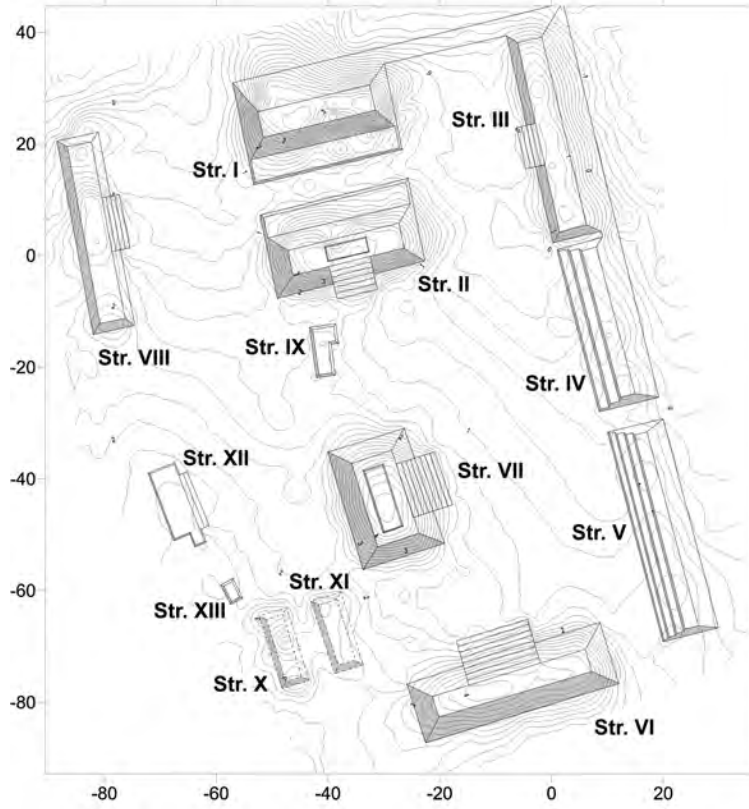


Figure 4. Moho Plaza, hieroglyphic stair located on Structure VI

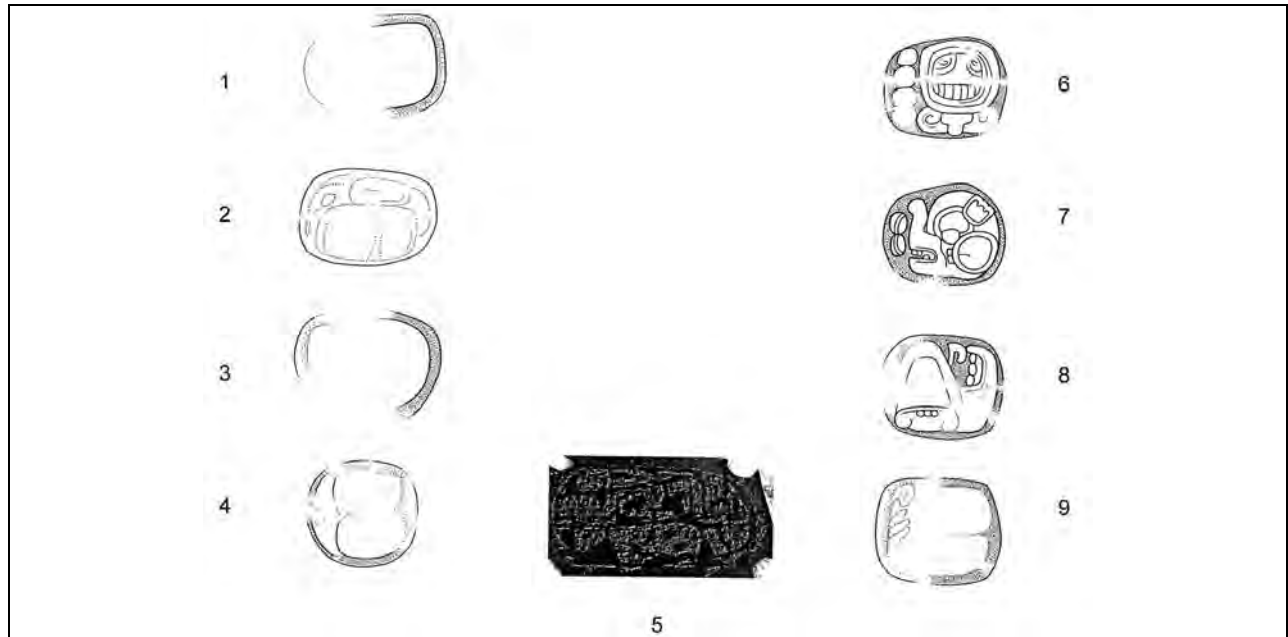


Figure 5. Hieroglyphic stair, Structure VI, Moho Plaza (drawing by C. Prager).

nature, and – what is more – that ritual feasting was not a significant activity in them.

In addition to the test-pitting program, in April and May of 2002 we conducted extensive salvage operations in a structure located in the center of the village of San Benito Poite, approximately 500 m east of the Stela Plaza. This structure was partially destroyed, and two others completely leveled, by a bulldozer sent to the community the week before Easter (Figure 8). Excavations in the Bulldozed Mound revealed an earlier substructure containing one preserved side, a partially preserved front, and a fragmentary stair that had been partially demolished by the ancient Maya. After consulting with the Department of Archaeology, we decided to remove all of the destroyed final structure and conserve the partially preserved substructure. This, we hope, will serve as a permanent reminder that the village of San Benito Poite is located on an important archaeological site.

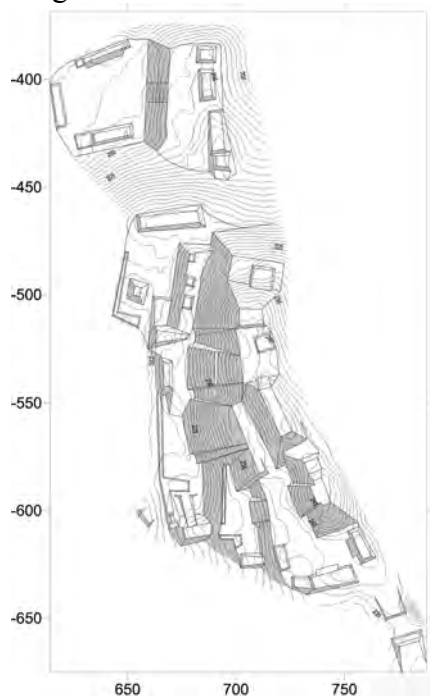


Figure 6. Gateway Hill Acropolis.

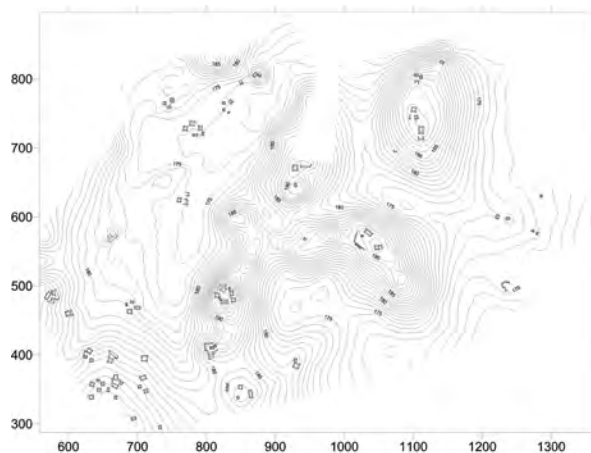


Figure 7. Northeast Settlement Zone.

The architectural style of the final stage of the Bulldozed Mound is quite late. A late date for both the construction and occupation of the final stage is strongly supported by analyses of both ceramic and obsidian artifacts recovered from the mound. Ceramics from the surface of the final stage structure include Fine Orange and crude utilitarian types strikingly related to the Ejar complex of Early Postclassic Copan. These, along with the presence of central Mexican obsidian from the Zaragoza and Pachuca sources, changes in the technology of prismatic blade production, and the replacement of El Chayal obsidian by material from the Ixtepeque source, allow us to confidently cross-date use of the final-stage structure to A.D. 950 ± 125 years.

Epigraphic Analyses

At least 46 sculpted monuments and monument fragments have been found at Pusilha. This corpus includes at least 21 carved stelae and stela fragments (Stelae A, A1, B-H, K-U, and Z), three zoomorphic altars (V-X), three ballcourt monuments (BSc 1-3), a hieroglyphic and figural stair (HS 1), and 18 carved fragments (Fragments 1-18). This last category includes pieces of what

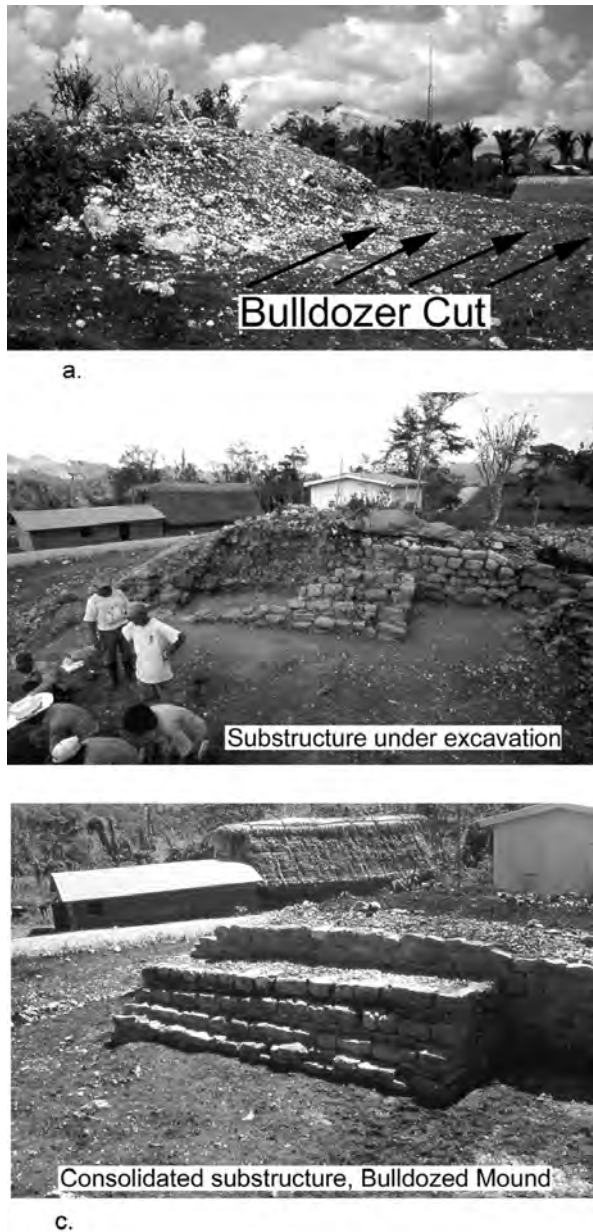


Figure 8. Photos of the Bulldozed Mound: (a) before excavation; (b) during excavation, showing partially destroyed substructure; (c) after consolidation.

appear to be a fourth zoomorphic altar and at least one additional stela. In addition to these sculpted monuments, two plain stelae, an unknown quantity of round altars, and numerous uncarved monument fragments have been found in the Stela Plaza, the Gateway Hill Acropolis, the Big Tree Group, and the Plain Stela Group. Twenty-two of the

carved monuments and fragments (Stelae C, D, E, F, H, K, M, N, O, P, Q and U, BSc 1, HS 1, Frag 1, 3, 7, 8, 10, 12, 14, 16, 17) contain hieroglyphic texts. Prager (2002) has presented a detailed epigraphic analysis of the inscriptions of Pusilha, which is summarized here.

The two earliest dates recorded on the monuments are 8.2.0.0.0 5 Ajaw 8 Sak (A.D. 81) and 8.6.0.0.0 10 Ajaw 13 Ch'en (A.D. 159). References to legendary events on these days are found on two stelae (P and K) that date to the Late Classic (Figures 9-10). The first historic date is 9.6.17.8.18 (A.D. 570) and is recorded on Stela P. The latest securely identified date is 9.16.0.0.0 2 Ajaw 13 Tzek (A.D. 751; Stela F), but two other monuments – including the hieroglyphic stair – contain dates that may be as late as A.D. 798. Thus, the historical events described in the Pusilha corpus took place over a period of 181 to 228 years, and the chronology of legendary and historic events spans 670 to 717 years.

A total of 38 individuals, of which 21 are chronologically embedded in the history of Pusilha, have so far been identified. Eleven individuals bear the title *k'uhul un ajaw* (divine ruler of Pusilha), and can be identified as kings and queens of Pusilha. In this paper, we focus on the reigns of seven lords and ladies who ruled between A.D. 570 and A.D. 731 or so (Figures 11-12). The historic account at Pusilha starts with Ruler A whose name glyph is read *k'awil chan k'inich* (Stelae P and D). He ascended the throne on 9.6.17.8.18 (Stela P), and celebrated the 9.8.0.0.0 period ending as a 4 *k'atun ajaw* (i.e., he was between 60 and 80 years of age). Ruler A erected Stelae O and Q in order to celebrate the *k'atun* endings of 9.7.0.0.0 and 9.8.0.0.0. Both of these monuments may have been shattered by enemies who attacked Pusilha on 9.8.1.12.8 (A.D.594). Stela D (Figure 13:D11-C12, D13-C14) mentions that

“stelae were broken” (*k’asay lakam tuun*) and the “flint and shield

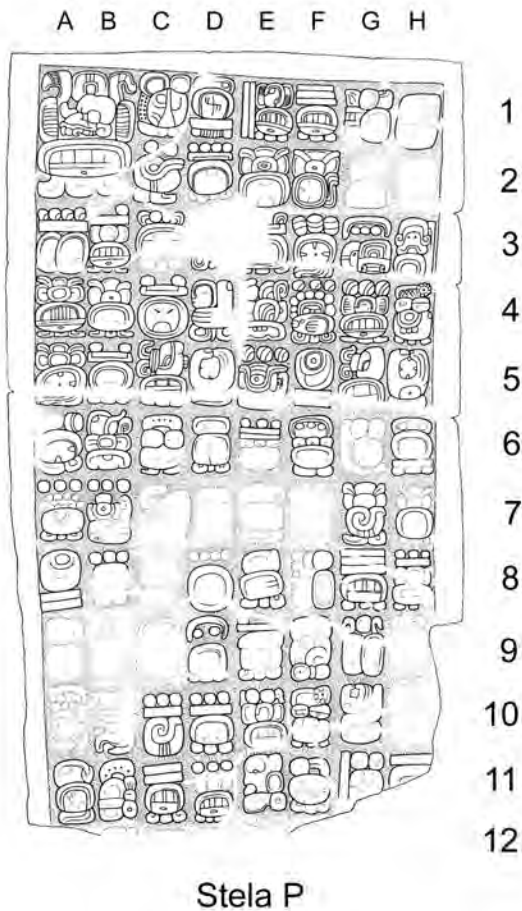


Figure 9. Putilha Stela P (drawing by C. Prager).

was downed” (*jub’u:y utok’ upakal*) on this date by an individual whose origin is not known, but whose name includes a glyph commonly found in much later texts from the Petexbatun and Pasion regions. The date of the defeat of Putilha falls within the reign of one of Copan’s greatest kings – Ruler 11, nicknamed B’utz Chan – but it is important to stress that there is no evidence linking Copan to this action.

Ruler A’s successor was called *k’ak’ uti’ chan*, and is nicknamed Ruler B. His hieroglyphic name is identical to that of Copan Ruler 11, which has raised the possibility that they were one and the same person. But since Ruler B was still living at

9.10.15.0.0 (Stelae P and D), some 20 years after the death of his namesake at Copan, they could not have been the same individual. Moreover, Stela P describes Ruler B as the “first sprout” or first son of Ruler A of Putilha. Nevertheless, hieroglyphic and iconographic evidence point to the fact that Putilha was under the cultural influence of Copan during the reign of Ruler B. But it seems that Copan symbolism was only shortly integrated into the iconography of Putilha, because Ruler B’s successors made no use of borrowed iconography. According to the final passage on Stela P, Ruler B’s deeds are linked to events that happened in A.D. 81 at the legendary “*Chi-Throne-Place*” (Figura 9:G10), a sacred location tied to early divine kingship in the southern Maya lowlands. This reference to the legendary past legitimizes Ruler B’s reign.

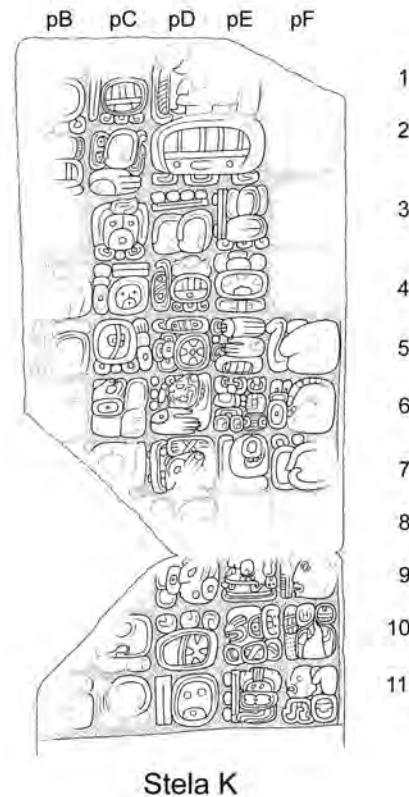


Figure 10. Putilha Stela K (drawing by C. Prager).

Ruler	Stelas	Birth	Accession/Reign	Death
A 	O, Q	9.4.0.0.1-9.4.19.17.19	9.6.17.8.18?	9.8.0.0.1-9.10.14.17.19
B 	P, D	9.7.4.9.12? 9.8.15.0.1-9.9.14.17.19	9.8.15.0.1-9.9.14.17.19	9.10.15.0.1-9.11.0.0.0
C 	H	9.7.12.6.7	9.11.0.0.0	9.11.0.0.1-9.12.0.0.0
D 	K		9.11.0.0.1-9.12.0.0.0	9.12.0.0.1-9.14.0.0.0
E 	M		9.12.0.0.1-9.14.0.0.0	9.14.0.0.1-9.15.0.0.0
F 	—		9.14.0.0.1-9.14.19.17.19	
G 	E		9.14.0.0.1-9.15.0.0.0	

Figure 11. Partial list of rulers of Pusilha (prepared by C. Prager).

Ruler C acceded to power and celebrated the *k'atun* ending 9.11.0.0.0 (Stela H). He was born less than eight years after Ruler B, and may have been his brother. Ruler C's reign was short, and Ruler D (NE' ... SAK K'UK' JUN ... AJ ...) celebrated the 9.12.0.0.0 *k'atun* ending (Stela K). Stela K links this event to a legendary celebration that took place in 8.6.0.0.0 at the already mentioned "Chi-Throne-Place". The actor in this mythical celebration is "Foliated Ajaw" (Figure 10:pC3), a legendary person mentioned at Copan, Tikal, and elsewhere. By re-enacting this legendary *k'atun* celebration, an event also discussed at powerful Copan, Ruler D legitimized his power.

There is no information available about the dynastic and political history of Pusilha between 9.12.0.0.0 and 9.14.0.0.0 (A.D. 672-711). This hiatus corresponds to the last 23 years of the reign of Smoke Imix God K (Ruler 12) and the first 17 years of the reign of Waxaklajun Ub'ah K'awil (Ruler 13) – the height of Copan's power in the southeast Maya lowlands. On 9.14.0.0.0, however, an individual nicknamed Ruler E set up Stela M. We do not know when he ascended to power or if his father was a divine ruler of Pusilha. After the death of

Ruler E a woman named *ix ich'ak ... k'inich* (nicknamed Ruler F) became divine lord of Pusilha. Given that her parents are not mentioned, it remains unclear if Ruler F was

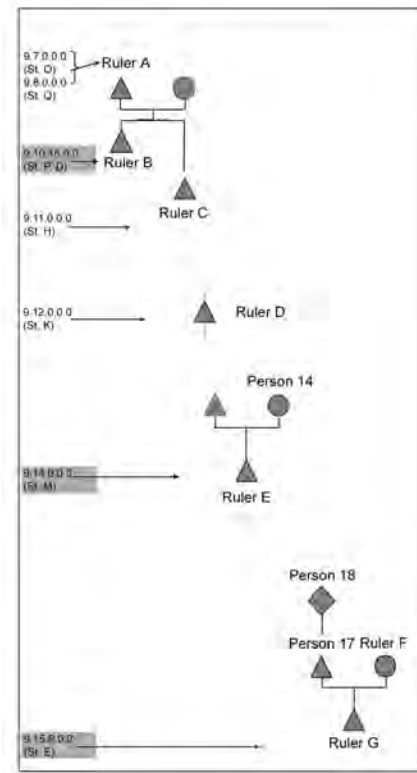


Figure 12. Genealogy of some Pusilha rulers (prepared by C. Prager).

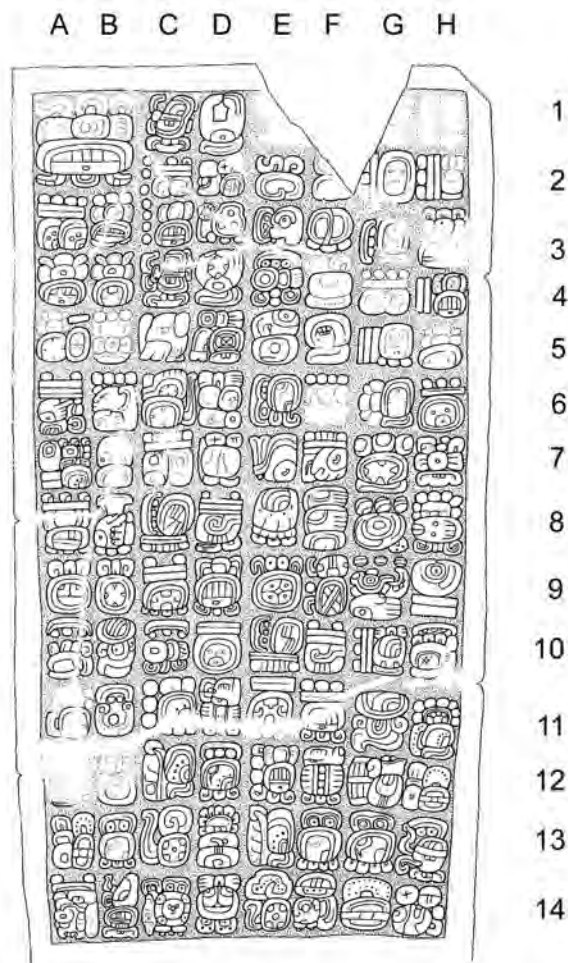


Figure 13. Putilha Stela D (drawing by C. Prager).

the daughter of Ruler E. She probably reigned only until her son, Ruler G, was old enough to ascend to the throne.

Ruler G erected Stela E, which describes his descent. Ruler G's father was named *k'inich bakis mo' lahun..*, and was a non-royal noble of unknown origin. The paternal grandfather of Ruler G was named *hun ew chak muyal chan yoaat ?ti' k'awil*, and was an important noble. Segments of this name phrase appear also at Naranjo, Copan, and Quirigua, suggesting that he came from an unknown site in the eastern or southeastern lowlands.

Two other individuals who may have been rulers are mentioned on Stela F and the hieroglyphic stair. The text of the first of

these monuments states that a person named *k'ak' kal ...* (Figure 14:A5) scattered liquid in celebration of the *k'atun* ending 9.16.0.0.0. (A.D. 751). A final individual whose name is not legible is mentioned on the hieroglyphic stair, which probably dates to 9.18.7.10.3 (A.D. 798). The text, read from glyphs 6-9 and then 1-4, says that the stair was dedicated on that date, perhaps by an individual (Figure 5:1) linked to the Pusilha emblem glyph.

The political history of Pusilha stands out for its antagonistic nature. There is textual and iconographic evidence of at least eight conflicts between 9.8.1.12.8 and 9.15.0.0.0. Unfortunately, the names of only a few of Pusilha's enemies have survived, and these are all small polities whose locations are unknown. For example, a new fragment found in 2001 depicts a kneeling captive who comes from a place called *b'alam*.

It is curious that the emblem glyphs of Copan, Quirigua, Tikal, Caracol, and other major powers do not appear at Pusilha. Nevertheless, hieroglyphic evidence suggests that Pusilha had significant contacts with sites north of the Maya Mountains, in the Petexbatun and Pasion region, and to the southeast. Stela Q of Pusilha is given a proper name identical to that of Caracol Stela 1, both of which were erected on 9.8.0.0.0. This hints that Pusilha maintained cultural contacts with Caracol. On Stela D the "Water-Scroll" toponym – seen so often in inscriptions from Aguateca and Seibal – is mentioned twice. Again, a name connected with the 9.8.1.12.8 event contains an element also seen in later inscriptions from that region. With the accession of B'utz' Chan (Ruler 11), an important and powerful ruler of Copan, cultural contacts with the southeast also become visible in the iconography and texts of Pusilha. In fact, Ruler B may even have been named after the great Copan lord.

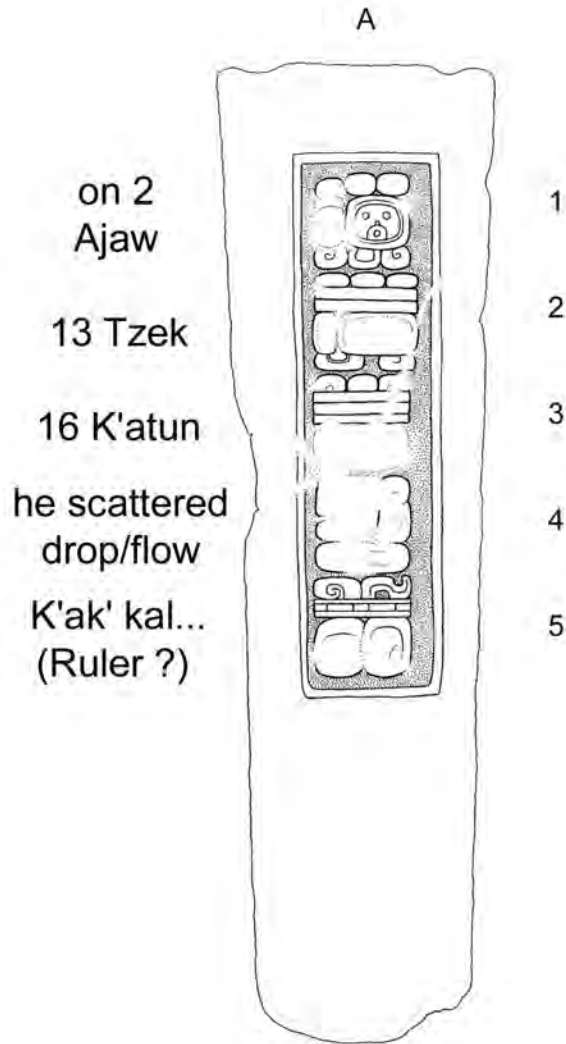


Figure 14. Pusilha Stela F (drawing by C. Prager).

Conclusions

Epigraphic, ceramic, and other artifact data have allowed us to extend our knowledge of the occupation of Pusilha from the end of the Early Classic well into the Early Postclassic period. Although we initially expected to find many indications of Copan supremacy, our epigraphic and artifact analyses point to a wide variety of influences from the southeastern lowlands, western Belize, and even the Petexbatun and Rio Pasion regions. None of these cultural influences – be they expressed in art, texts, or objects of material culture – argue strongly that Pusilha was a secondary polity beneath

the political and economic hegemony of any foreign power, except, conjecturally, during the years immediately following the 9.8.1.12.8 warfare event and during a brief 40 year hiatus of monument erection at the end of the 7th century. Our project, of course, has only just begun, and it is entirely possible that our excavations of 24 test pits and one very late structure have missed critical data. During the next five years, in fact, we plan to continue to search for such data.

Nevertheless, after two seasons we are less certain that Pusilha was annexed by Copan and later asserted its independence (as suggested by the Dynamic Model of state formation) or that Pusilha was a secondary pawn in a centuries-long conflict fought between Tikal and Calakmul. That the many and lengthy hieroglyphic texts do not even once mention these sites – let alone Copan, Quirigua, or even nearby Nim li Punut – suggests that Pusilha maintained its independence in a rather peripheral region of the Maya world throughout its long history.

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