THE KINGDOM OF THE AVOCADO: RECENT INVESTIGATIONS AT PUSILHÁ, A CLASSIC MAYA CITY OF SOUTHERN BELIZE

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ABSTRACT

Since 2001, the Pusilhá Archaeological Project has examined the ancient settlement patterns, carved monuments, ceramics, and architecture of an important Maya city located in southern Belize, Central America. Our goals have been to test models of secondary state formation and external relations – proposed most often from a perspective based in the central Maya lowlands – from a peripheral area or frontier zone. Investigations have included extensive mapping, test pitting, and both horizontal and vertical excavations. During the 2005 season, the tomb of an important ruler or *K'uhul Un Ajaw* was discovered and excavated. Results of our epigraphic and archaeological analyses suggest that, contrary to our prior expectations, Pusilhá was never under the political or economic sway of its more powerful neighbors. This suggests that a "third way" to secondary state formation, one that did not depend on the influence of established and authoritative states, may have been important in some regions of the Maya area.

Key Words: Ancient Maya, State Formation, hieroglyphic texts, archaeology of Belize.

For much of the 20th century, Classic Maya society was depicted as simply organized, consisting of dispersed populations of slash-and-burn agriculturalists. These rural farmers were thought to have supported priests or priest-kings living in otherwise uninhabited "vacant ceremonial centers." Since the late 1950s, however, scholars have amassed abundant evidence demonstrating that the ancient Maya closely resembled other archaic civilizations; they were not as unique as many Mayanists seemed to wish. Now it is widely accepted that both rural and urban populations were governed by a complex hierarchy of powerful rulers and subordinate nobles, and that Maya agriculture was a mosaic of both labor intensive and extensive techniques (e.g., Culbert 1991; Culbert and

Rice 1990; Fedick 1997; Houston and Stuart 2000; Marcus 1983; Turner and Harrison 1983). Although there still is some debate concerning the nature of major centers, most scholars view the largest sites as true cities, containing a variety of part-time and full-timespecialists (e.g., Chase et al. 1990; Inomata and Houston 2000, 2001; cf. Sanders and Webster 1988; Webster 2000). Current discussion focuses on: (1) the degree of political and economic complexity of the ancient Maya; (2) the extent to which Maya polities were hierarchically and horizontally structured; (3) the organizing principles of society; (4) the level of integration versus segmentation; (5) the size and number of Maya states; and (6) the origin and course of Maya political development (e.g., Blanton and Feinman 1984; Brumfiel 1994; Chase 1992; Chase and Chase 1987; Culbert 1991; Fash and Stuart 1991; Isaacs 1996; Marcus 1983; 1992; 1993; 1994; 1998; Rice 1987; Ringle and Bey 2001).

Two perennial questions of Maya archaeology are: "To what extent were Maya polities horizontally and vertically integrated?" and "How were Maya economies structured, and what role did the elite play in their organization?" Decentralists assert that Maya political structures were poorly integrated, and fragilely held together by lineage ties, redistribution, ideological authority, or ritual performance (e.g., Ball and Taschek 1991; Demarest 1992; Fox 1987; Ringle and Bey 1992). In contrast, centralists propose that at least some Maya polities, such as Tikal, Calakmul, and Caracol, were highly integrated states where social structure was provided more by class-ties and institutionalized power

Figure 1. Pusilhá, Belize, showing locations of excavations and survey conducted in 2004-2005.

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than by kinship or performance (e.g., Chase 1992). Despite their many differences, both centralist and decentralist perspectives are similar in one key respect. They all are static depictions that de-emphasize the ongoing processes of political coalescence and disintegration.

There are two current models that adopt a more fluid and dynamic approach to Maya polities. Because of their diachronic nature, these models are able to combine aspects of both centralist and decentralist positions. They argue that the relative levels of hierarchy and heterarchy, and of integration and fragmentation, changed over time. The first is Joyce Marcus' (1992, 1993, 1994, 1998) dynamic model of state formation, derived from Ralph Roys' (1957) ethnohistoric work concerning the organization of the Maya provinces of Yucatán at the moment of conquest. Marcus argues that archaic states were inherently unstable and cycled in a predictable manner. State formation and fragmentation, in her model, occured as provinces were absorbed and eventually broke away from a political core. During the process of territorial expansion, the political hierarchies of provinces became incorporated with that of the core, leading to a relatively high degree of

Figure 2. Stela K with retrospective reference to "Foliated Ajaw" (a); Stela P, which begins with an Initial Series Date corresponding to A.D. 573 (b) (drawings by Christian Prager).

centralization. As provinces broke away, the state fragmented. Newly independent polities might have maintained many of the trappings of the archaic state to which they once belonged – including notions of divine kingship – but could have been relatively decentralized in their structure. A new archaic state began to form again as one of these provinces annexed its neighbor. Throughout her argument, Marcus stresses three points. First, the state-like characteristics of small, independent polities are due to emulation of the political cores to which they once were linked. Second, regional provinces – rather than larger-scale archaic states – are the stable units of both political and economic organization. And third, throughout most of the cycle, innovation and change are more visible in peripheral provinces than in the core. These all are good reasons to conduct archaeological investigations at secondary centers located in shifting political frontiers.

A second model, based entirely on hieroglyphic evidence, supposes that the Classic-period Maya were organized into two "superstates" centered at Tikal and Calakmul (Martin and Grube 1995, 2000). The word "superstate," however, is misleading because Tikal and Calakmul are viewed more as the foci of fluctuating hegemonies than as the cores of two large, unitary states. In this model, the provinces of Marcus' dynamic model were manipulated – rather than annexed and incorporated – by the two most-powerful polities. Manipulation took the form of marriage alliance and female hypogamy, the installation of local kings by more-powerful foreign rulers, frequent ambassadorial visits and gift giving, and especially by sponsoring war events between provinces aligned with different "superstates." Thus, Simon Martin and Nikolai Grube (1995, 2000) interpret the political history of the Classic Maya in terms of the struggles waged between rival small polities aligned with each of the "superstates." Their model supposes that political centralization would not be clearly manifested outside of the two great powers, and indeed some of the smaller "provinces" could be more than nominally independent of their stronger neighbors. Nevertheless, connections with the superstates should be amply demonstrated in the hieroglyphic texts of secondary allies.

The Pusilhá Archaeological Project, which we have directed for four field and laboratory seasons since 2001, focuses on one such province or small polity located on the eastern periphery of the Maya area, in a frontier zone between much larger polities to the north and south (Fig. 1). Our interest in Pusilhá grew out of research Braswell and Bill conducted at Copán, a well-studied Maya city located in western Honduras. Since the rediscovery of Pusilhá in 1927, a connection of some sort between Pusilhá and the Copán and Quiriguá regions has been posited by several investigators (Bishop and Beaudry 1994; Hammond 1986; Morley 1938; Reents n.d.; Wanyerka 1999). Evidence for this connection consists of a shared artistic tradition of carved-in-the-round zoomorphic altars, close similarities between the Pusilhá and Quiriguá emblem glyphs (emblem glyphs are titles for rulers, whose main-signs name polities, places, or perhaps dynasties), and apparent references at Pusilhá to Ruler 11 of Copán and an enigmatic figure nicknamed "Foliated Ajaw," once thought to have been a predynastic ruler of the Honduran city (Fig. 2a). Moreover, published illustrations of polychrome pottery recovered from Pusilhá suggested an artistic or economic link with Copán, and chemical analyses of sherds from the British Museum

found in a box labeled "From Pusilhá" demonstrate that they were made from Copán clays (Bishop and Beaudry 1994; Bishop et al. 1986).[1]

Marcus (1992, 1994) suggests that, like Quiriguá, Pusilhá may have begun its political history as a small regional province, may later have been annexed by the expanding Copán state (at about A.D. 430), and finally, may have reasserted its independence during the period of Copán's political fragmentation (beginning about A.D. 738). Alternatively, following Martin and Grube's (1995, 2000) "superstate" model, we also considered the possibility that Pusilhá and Copán were linked not just with each other, but both were secondary allies of Tikal. We hoped to evaluate both of these hypotheses from an economic perspective, as well as through the careful analysis of the large hieroglyphic corpus of Pusilhá. That is, our plan was to understand the dynastic and political history of the site as revealed through the study of hieroglyphic texts, and to interpret changes in the material culture of the city in light of pivotal events revealed by its history.

As often is the case in archaeological research, we have now largely abandoned both our preconceptions and our political models. We now argue that Pusilhá was *never* closely allied in any political or economic sense with Copán or Tikal. Although both Marcus' dynamic model and Martin and Grube's superstate model may be applicable to the populous core of the Maya area, we now believe that there was an independent and non-allied "third way" to state formation in peripheral and underpopulated regions of the Maya lowlands. In specific, we argue that in the case of Pusilhá, migration, secondary state development, and the maintenance of political neutrality may have been the results of instability and warfare in the southwestern Petén.

PUSILHÁ

The Maya city of Pusilhá, capital of a regional polity called **Un** or avocado, is located in the village of San Benito Poité, Toledo District, less than 2 km east of the border with Guatemala (Fig. 1). Rediscovered and explored by archaeologists from the British Museum Expedition to British Honduras in 1927, it was one of the first sites in Belize to be systematically investigated (Gruning 1930; 1931; Joyce 1929; Joyce et al. 1927; 1928; Thompson 1928). At that time, the best-preserved stelae from the site were cut up and transported to London. Sylvanus G. Morley (1938) included a lengthy discussion of their calendrical glyphs in *The Inscriptions of Peten*, but despite their early fame, the Pusilhá stelae brought to England have been in storage at the British Museum for decades. In addition to the monuments, the pottery of Pusilhá was viewed by early investigators as extraordinary. Thomas Joyce's (1929) description of ceramics excavated from Pottery Cave, a large natural *chultun* at the base of an important residential group at Pusilhá, was

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[1] Hammond (1975) notes that the British Museum collection from southern Belize has become disorganized since its recovery in the late 1920s. Leventhal (personal communication, 2000) observes that none of the sherds labeled as "from Pusilhá" that were subject to neutron activation analysis are those illustrated by Thomas Joyce. Thus, their site provenience is not at all clear. It is distinctly possible that the analyzed sherds may have been part of a comparative collection from Copán that was sent to Joyce.

one of the very first ceramic analyses published for the Maya Lowlands and provided important comparative data for the major ceramic sequence later developed at Uaxactún. Finally, a unique ancient Maya bridge spanning the Machaca River also drew the attention of archaeologists to Pusilhá.

Despite its large size, considerable number of carved monuments, a unique work of engineering, and importance to ceramicists working in the early 20th century, very little systematic research has been conducted at Pusilhá during the past 70 years (cf. Hammond 1975; Leventhal 1990; 1992; Walters and Weller n.d.). The principal reason is that until 2001, Pusilhá was one of the most isolated major centers in Belize; the nearest dirt road was an 11-mile walk from the small Q'eqchi' village where the site is located. A dirt track was cut in March 2001, and the village now has sporadic bus service to the district capital of Punta Gorda, 41 miles and two-and-a-half dusty hours away. In ancient times, Pusilhá was not as isolated as it is today. The city may have served as an important node on a north-south trade route, articulating trade between the Maya lowlands and the southeastern Mesoamerican periphery. The upper Río Mopán region is located just 20 km north of the upper Pusilhá River, therefore sites in the eastern Petén and western Belize may have been connected to Quiriguá, Copán, and non-Maya Honduras via Pusilhá in southern Belize. Strong ceramic evidence for exchange between these regions – in particular between northern and western Belize and the southeastern periphery – has been known for some time (Beaudry-Corbett et al. 1993; Hirth 1988; Joyce 1988; Sheptak 1987; Urban 1993). One of our initial hypotheses was that Copán became interested in the Pusilhá region because of its intermediate and potentially controlling position along this north-south trade route. But Pusilhá is also located at the juncture of two west-to-east flowing rivers. The Pusilhá river, for which the site is named, has its headwaters to the west in the Maya Mountains of Petén. From there it is but a short journey to the Río Machaquilá and Río Cancuén, which drain westward into watersheds of the Pasión, the Petexbatún, and the Usumacinta. Pusilhá, therefore, is located near the eastern end of a riverine route connecting the Caribbean Sea to the Gulf of Mexico. Our excavation data suggest, in fact, that this second east-west trade route was much more important to the residents of Pusilhá than north-south connections. We considered the possibility that Copán or Tikal sought access to the east-west route by controlling Pusilhá. But our evidence now suggests that throughout its history, Pusilhá maintained its strongest cultural links with the small riverine polities to the west, and had much less interaction with Copán, Tikal, Caracol, and other sites to the north and south.

CERAMIC ANALYSIS

One of the principal lines of argument against close economic ties with Copán is drawn from the analysis of ceramics excavated during the past three field seasons. Bill (Bill and Braswell 2005; Bill et al. 2005; Braswell et al. 2004) has studied these materials and has tentatively defined a four-phase sequence of occupation dating to the beginning of the Late Classic (A.D. 600-700), the later Late Classic (A.D. 700-780), the Terminal Classic (A.D. 780-850), and the Postclassic (A.D. 950-1100). Although we have seen

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	
X1	U			
X2	F		9.16.0.0.0	
X3	Hieroglyphic Stair		9.16.7.10.37	

Figure 3. Known rulers of Pusilhá. Ruler X1, who shares the same name as Ruler B, cannot yet be tied to absolute dates. The single reference to Individual X2 on Stela F, although well dated, does not explicitly link him to the Pusilhá emblem glyph. The text on the Hieroglyphic Stair contains a calendar round date and an emblem glyph, but the nominal referent is highly eroded (prepared by Christian Prager).

materials from caves in the area of Pusilhá that demonstrate that the region was visited during the Early Classic period, Bill has identified only two possible Early Classic sherds in our excavated collections, both recovered from the same mixed fill context. Nevertheless, Stela P begins with a Maya Initial Series date of A.D. 573 and contains a historical retrospective date of A.D. 570, implying that the kingdom was founded shortly before the beginning of the Late Classic period (Fig. 2b). There is no evidence, however, for any sort of permanent occupation during the early 5th century, the period that Marcus suggests for the incorporation of Pusilhá into the Copán state.

The Late Classic assemblage of Pusilhá reveals close ceramic ties with the Petén, particularly the southern and southwestern lowlands, but only slight evidence of interaction with western Honduras, where Copán is located. These evanescent ties are manifested principally in polychrome pottery that shares a few motifs with contemporary painted ceramics from Copán, and strangely, from eastern El Salvador. Although the data are not robust, our excavations in and around Pottery Cave suggest that these weak ties with the southeastern periphery were most evident during the early facet of the Late Classic period, that is during the first decades of the history of the city. There is no evidence of interaction with the Valley of Belize (located to the north) during either the early or late
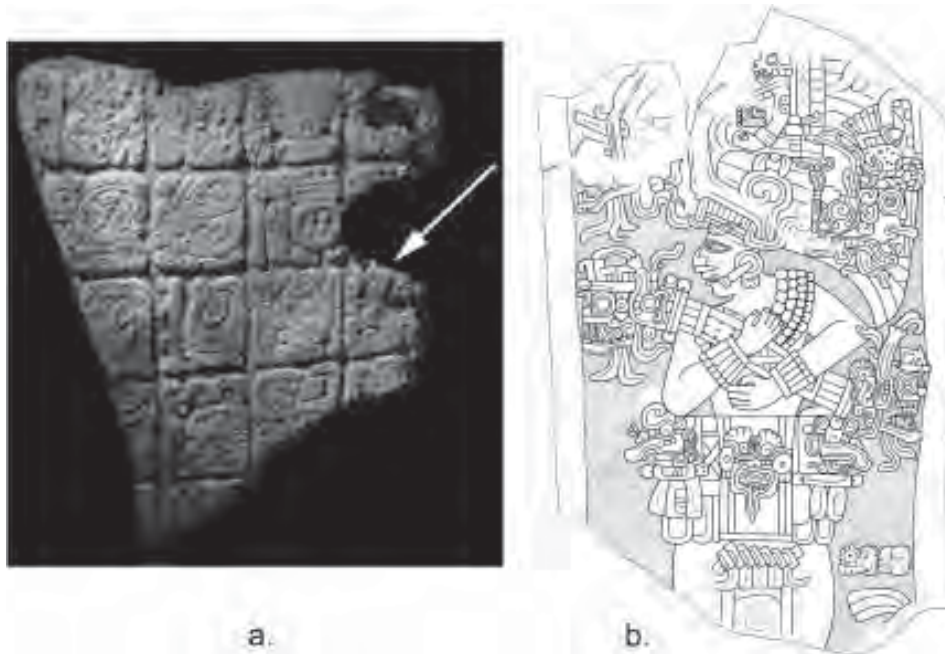
*Figure 4. Stela U showing reference to **k'ak' u ti' chan** (II) or Individual X1 (a); Stela C, a Late Classic monument of unknown date (b) (drawings by Christian Prager).*

facet of the Late Classic period. Instead, utilitarian forms, modes, and decorative elements are most closely related to pottery found at southern Petén cities, including Cancuén and sites in the Pasión and Petexbatún regions (Bill and Braswell 2005; Bill et al. 2005). Hieroglyphic inscriptions also support ties with these small, western kingdoms. To speculate, it may be that the Late Classic population of Pusilhá originally came from the southwestern Petén (Braswell et al. 2006). In short, Late Classic Pusilhá was what Mayanists call a Tepeu-sphere site sharing much with the Petén, some design elements with non-Tepeu sites such as Copán in the southeastern periphery, and very little with the Belize Valley.

We have recovered a surprising amount of Terminal Classic pottery – materials that date to the era of the famous "Maya Collapse" – from surface and floor contexts at Pusilhá. An important new arrival of this time period, roughly the end of the 8th and early 9th centuries, was Belize Red from the Belize Valley (Bill and Braswell 2005; Bill et al. 2005). This demonstrates that exchange relations with new regions were forged during this period of crisis. Fine Orange ware also was imported or locally manufactured, and

carved drinking vessels of the "Brandy Snifter" form suggest ties with the northwestern lowlands, at the opposite corner of the Maya world. Finally, the crude and unstandardized Postclassic ceramic assemblage, which we date to about A.D. 950-1100 or long after the Maya Collapse, represents a sharp technological break from Classic traditions, new highly decentralized modes of production and exchange, and perhaps even the arrival of new settlers to a region that had been abandoned for a century or more (Bill and Braswell 2005; Bill et al. 2005).

EPIGRAPHIC ANALYSIS

Prager's (2002, 2003) analysis of the Pusilhá hieroglyphic corpus – some 23 stelae, a hieroglyphic staircase, and 18 miscellaneous sculptural fragments – supports Bill's ceramic conclusions. He has identified 40 named individuals, including eight rulers linked to the Pusilhá emblem glyph and two additional probable Terminal Classic rulers (Fig. 3). Preliminary analyses suggested that Ruler B of Pusilhá, whose name is read as **k'ak' u ti' chan**, was the same individual as Ruler 11 of Copán (Reents n.d.). This was an important datum supporting Marcus' conclusion that Pusilhá was once a province of the Copán state. But we now know that the two kings were only partially contemporary

Figure 5. The Stela Plaza, Ballcourt 1, and connecting sacbe.

individuals who had distinct sets of parents. Moreover, Ruler B of Pusilhá is specifically described as the eldest "sprout" of Pusilhá Ruler A rather than the son of any Copán personage (Prager 2002; 2003; Braswell et al. 2004). It just so happens that these two rulers shared the same name. Nonetheless, this is the only known case of two contemporary Maya kings sharing a name, so it is conceivable that the somewhat younger Pusilhá Ruler B was named after his older and more powerful counterpart at Copán. During the 2005 field season, we recovered three fragments of Stela U and moved them to a safe location. Close examinations of Stela U suggest that a second ruler of Pusilhá who lived somewhere near the end of the 8th century also shared this name, **k'ak' u ti' chan** (Fig. 4a).

A second Maya lord is mentioned in the hieroglyphic texts of both Copán and Pusilhá. This individual, nicknamed Foliated Ajaw, was thought to have been a pre-dynastic ruler of Copán who lived in the year A.D. 159 (Fig. 2a). Curiously, Pusilhá texts describe him overseeing some event on precisely the same date as is inscribed on Copán Stela I. Since we began our research, other references to Foliated Ajaw have been found on many retrospective texts at Tikal, Calakmul, and Quiriguá. It now seems likely that rather than being a predynastic ruler of Copán, Foliated Ajaw was a legendary or divine figure linked somehow to the origin of kingship, perhaps in the vicinity of the giant Preclassic city of El Mirador (Grube 2004; Guenter 2003).

In sum, neither of the two possible political connections with Copán once considered now seems likely. Although some personal names and a toponym suggest interaction with the Pasión and Petexbatún zones to the west, there is no clear mention in the corpus of Copán, Quiriguá, Tikal, Calakmul, or any other well-known site in the Maya lowlands. Moreover, there are no known references to Pusilhá in the hieroglyphic texts of these or any other site. It appears, therefore, that Pusilhá was not intimately involved with the political machinations of these important polities. Engaging again in conjecture, it may be that Pusilhá was founded at the beginning of the Late Classic period by factions who – like the modern Q'eqchi' – sought southern Belize as a haven against the political troubles in the Petén (Braswell et al. 2006).

Two rulers of Pusilhá, Ruler A and Ruler G, employed the important title **och'k'in kalo'mte'**, roughly glossed as "western lord" (we have no translation of the verbal root **kalo'm**). At Tikal, Copán, and elsewhere, this title is clearly associated with the founding of new male lines of royal descent, that is, they are special titles reserved for dynastic founders (Braswell 2003). The use of the **och'k'in kalo'mte'** title by Ruler A (apparently the first *ajaw* or ruler of Pusilhá) and by Ruler G (who inherited through his mother, rather than through his foreign-born father) is consistent with this meaning. At Tikal, the title **och'k'in kalo'mte'** is also viewed as indicating a "high king" of extraordinary power and has been associated with Teotihuacan, the great non-Maya city of highland Mexico (e.g., Stuart 2000). Pusilhá's Ruler A and Ruler G – both dynastic founders of somewhat shaky family origins – seem to appeal to the mysterious and esoteric power of Teotihuacan in legitimizing their claims to the throne. This is particularly interesting because by the time Ruler G was born, Teotihuacan had long since ceased to be an important and populace city.

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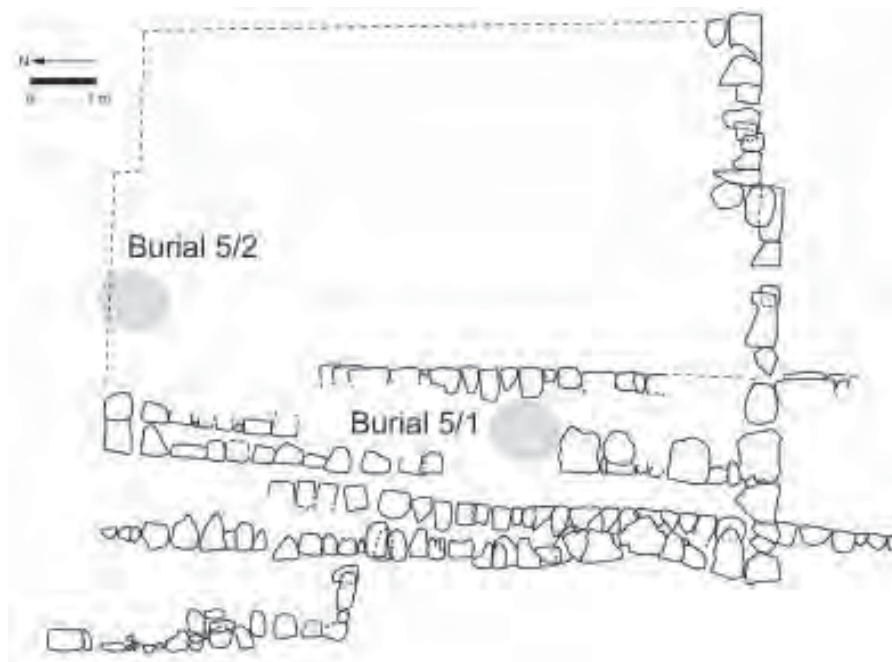*Figure 6. Lower Groups I and II showing excavated structures.*

Figure 7. Plan of the Op. 5 structure showing associated burials.
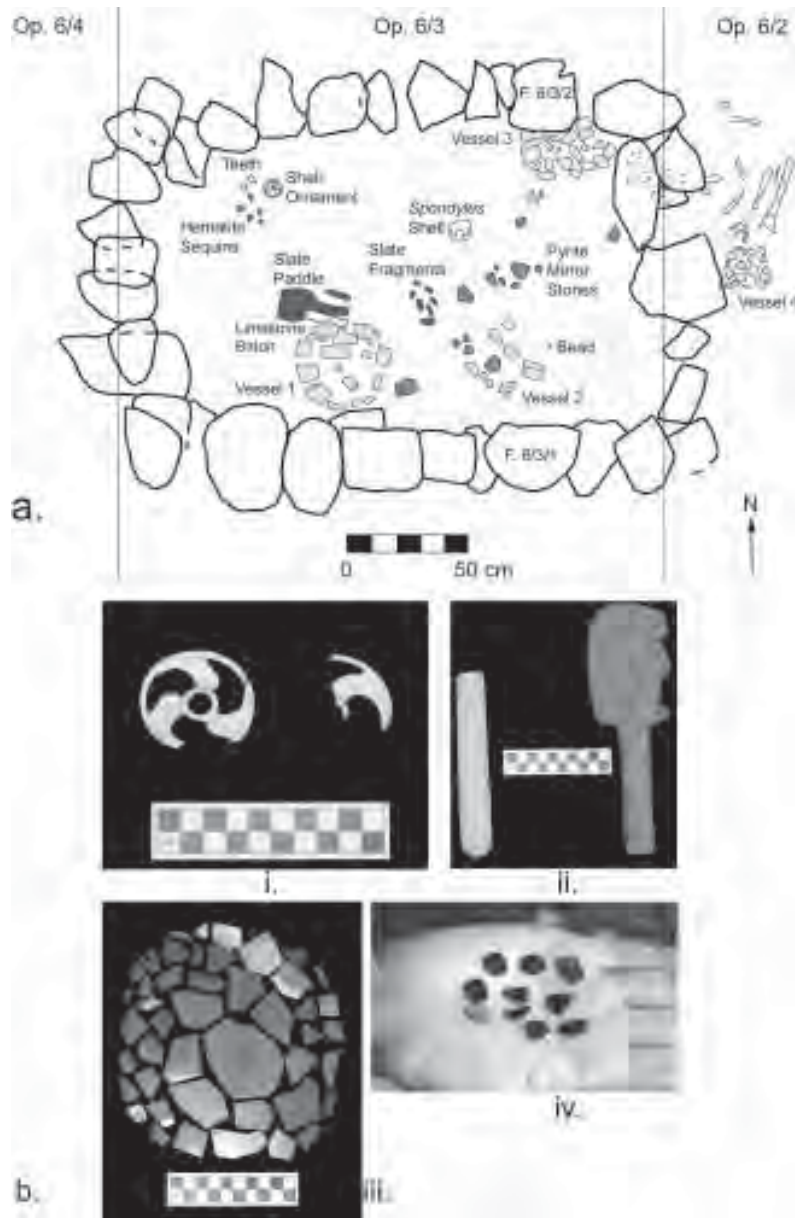
Figure 8. Burial 6/1, Op. 6 structure elaborate crypt (a); items found in Burial 6/ 1: shell ornaments (i); limestone baton and slate "paddle" (ii); pyrite mirror tesserae (iii); hematite sequins (iv) (b).
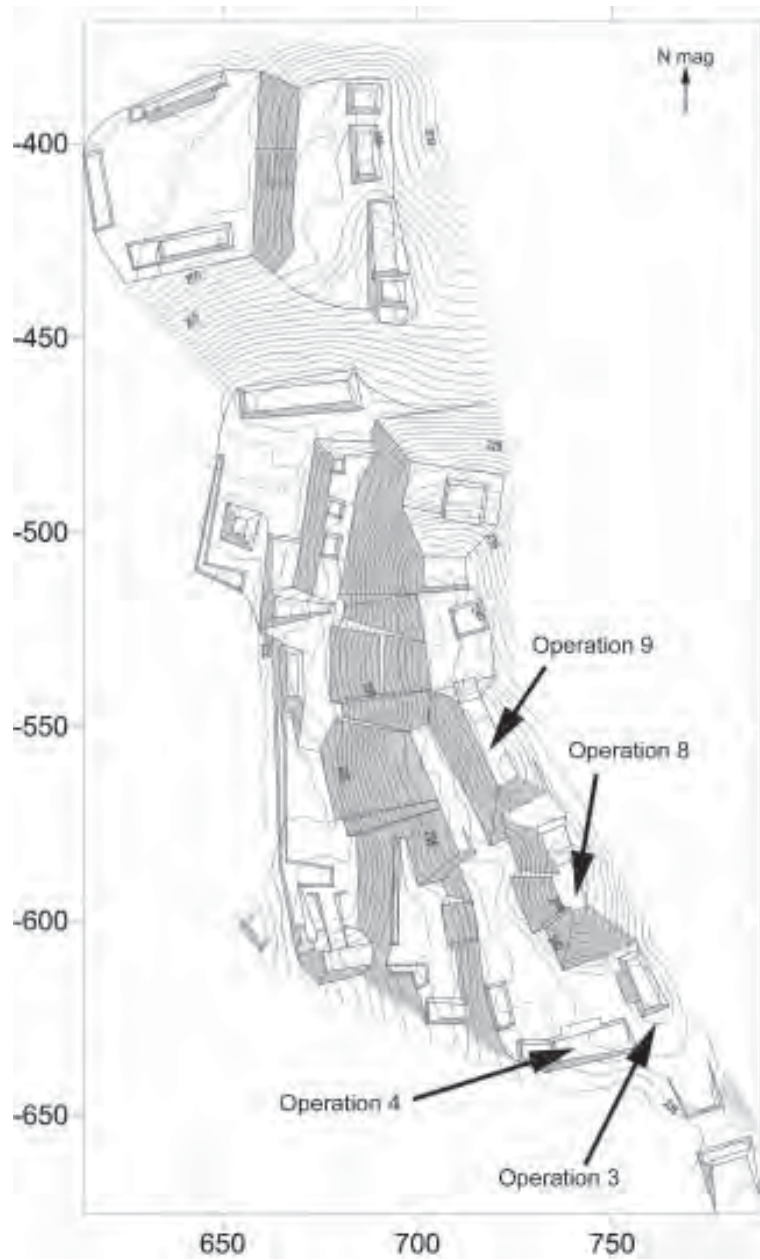
Figure 9. The Gateway Hill Acropolis showing locations of excavated structures.

In addition to two uses of this possibly Teotihuacan-inspired title by rulers of Pusilhá, Stela C (Fig. 4b), of which only the front is legible, displays a ruler holding a serpent bar with depictions of the Central Mexican storm/Venus/war god. We raise the issue of claims of a Teotihuacan affiliation because it is of relevance to the identity of the individual in a royal tomb excavated during the 2005 field season.

SURVEY

An important aspect of research at Pusilhá is the mapping of residential and special-function architecture throughout the site. Our survey methodology consists of two facets: (1) systematic mapping along cleared transects; and (2) opportunistic mapping of large *milpas* burned by the inhabitants of San Benito Poité village. The entire site of Pusilhá, perhaps some 6 km^2 in area, is subject to shifting slash-and-burn agriculture. Thus, the second method is a far more efficient means of mapping large portions of the ancient city. With the exception of survey operations conducted in and around the Gateway Hill Acropolis, we have concentrated on the triangle of land between the Poité and Pusilhá (locally called the Machaca) rivers. This does not imply that large, dense settlements do not exist outside of this region. In fact, the area north of the Poité river has impressive architectural groups that we hope to survey in later years.

To date, approximately 500 structures have been mapped in an area of more than 2 km^2. Settlement is most dense on ridge tops that run approximately east-west. Settlement is also dense within 150 m of each river. Low regions between ridges – wet areas that today are reserved for farming – have the lowest density of settlement.

Most habitation groups are formed rather casually around plazas and do not follow strict rules of site planning. The most elaborate architectural groups, however, are built on a NNW-SSE axis. Such groups include the Moho Plaza, the Lunar Group, the Stela Plaza, Lower Group I, and the Gateway Hill Acropolis (Braswell et al. 2004). A common plan is shared by the first three of these architectural complexes. This plan includes three low, parallel, and closely spaced range structures along the eastern side of the plaza, a more open western side, and paired pyramidal structures defining the north and south ends of the group (in the case of the Moho Plaza, the northmost structure is a ballcourt rather than a square platform). Both controlled excavations and looters trenches reveal that many north and south pyramids contain burials. This suggests an important deviation from the "Eastern Ancestor Shrine" or "E-group" pattern so well known from western Belize, the northeastern Petén, and Tikal. In other words, the alignment and the specific patterning of structures that is replicated in these groups seems to be a distinguishing trait of the Southern Belize Region (as defined by Leventhal 1990; 1992), if not a unique characteristic of Pusilhá itself.

There is at least one instance of an even larger pattern of architectural planning. The Stela Plaza, located at the highest point of the ridge between the two rivers, is connected by a sloping *sacbe* to a second group containing Ballcourt 1 (Fig. 5). Wendy Ashmore (1991; Ashmore and Sabloff 2002; see also Šprajc 2005) has described certain cosmological principles that, in some cases, were incorporated into site planning. Specifi-
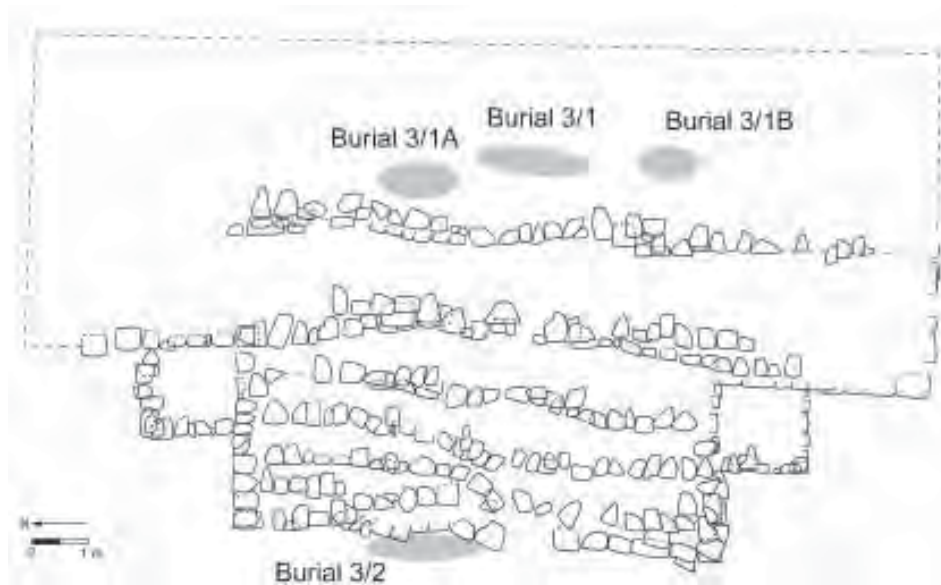
Figure 10. Plan of the Op. 3 structure showing associated burials.

cally, structures located to the north are often associated with the heavens and ancestor worship. In contrast, buildings located to the south are associated with the night, death, and the underworld. Structures to the east and west (such as Eastern Ancestor Shrines and E-groups) are often associated with the passage of the sun. Applying these concepts to the complex formed by the Stela Plaza, *sacbe*, and Ballcourt 1, it is possible to interpret the layout of these groups.

The Stela Plaza is found at the northwest end of the *sacbe* and is therefore conceptually linked to the heavens. Its location at the highest point on the hill supports and reinforces this identification. Ceramics recovered from the group included large numbers of incense burners but very few cooking or serving vessels. In fact, no *jute* shells (from a river snail that was commonly consumed at Pusilhá, and one of the most prevalent forms of household waste at the city) were recovered from test pits, suggesting that eating was not a frequent activity conducted at the Stela Plaza. The focus of the group is the large row of altars and stelae that depict the divine rulers of Pusilhá and contain texts describing their exploits. Thus, the principal activity conducted in the Stela Plaza probably was ancestor worship. In contrast, Ballcourt 1 is located at the southeast end of the *sacbe* at the lowest point on the ridge. Low ground, the south, and the ballgame are all associated with the underworld and death. Finally, along the *sacbe* and between these two groups is another cluster of structures whose more casual arrangement suggests they probably formed an elite residential area. Their intermediate position between the heavens and the

underworld implies that they represent both our world and the cosmic center of the Maya universe.

EXCAVATIONS

In addition to a series of test pits (assigned to Operation 1), we have excavated eight substantial structures at Pusilhá (called the Op. 2-9 structures). The first of these, also known as the "Bulldozed Mound" (Fig. 1), was a critically damaged Late to Terminal Classic range structure that was occupied into the Postclassic period. Today, all that remains is a consolidated Late Classic substructure. Excavations of that platform have been discussed elsewhere (Braswell et al. 2004) and are not repeated here. Instead, we describe extensive horizontal and vertical excavations conducted in 2004 and 2005 in four additional platforms: the Op. 5 and Op. 6 structures (located in Lower Group I; Fig. 1) and the Op. 3 and Op. 8 structures (located at the southern end of the Gateway Hill Acropolis).

Excavations in Lower Group I: The Operation 5 and 6 Structures

In 2004, excavations were conducted in three structures in what we call Lower Group I (Fig. 6), 100 m east of the southern end of the acropolis. Two platforms, the Op. 5 and Op. 6 structures, were substantially excavated, but the Op. 7 structure – encountered in a heavily looted state – was subjected only to test-pitting. It is interesting, however, that the only two possible Early Classic sherds that we discovered come from this test pit. It also is important to note that little evidence of Terminal Classic activity was discovered anywhere in the group, indicating that Lower Group I was built, occupied, and abandoned during the Late Classic Period.

Excavation of the Op. 5 structure. The Op. 5 structure is a low, poorly preserved, and simply-built range structure along the western edge of Lower Group I (Fig. 7). Excavations revealed that the platform was added on to the edge of the plaza platform. Two burials were encountered. Burial 5/1 consists of the partial remains of a child under 10- and probably closer to five-years old. The burial was cut into the front (western) edge of the Op. 5 structure platform, which was repaired using fill rather than facing stones. A simple shell necklace was the only grave good associated with the child. The burial is fascinating, however, because the child's deciduous incisors were inlayed with jade. Such inlays are extremely rare in milk teeth. Burial 5/2 consists of very partial remains found eroding out of the mound surface. No grave goods were associated with this second individual.

Excavation of the Op. 6 structure. The most complex burial – Burial 6/1 – encountered in the group was found in the Op. 6 structure, a low pyramidal mound at the southern end of the group (Fig. 8a). The interment is a secondary burial. Human remains were fragmentary and jumbled, and the grave goods appeared to have been scooped out of their primary contexts and redeposited in broken and fragmentary condition. These

goods consist of four vessels (one of which probably dates to the re-interment), a pyrite mirror with a fragmentary slate back, hematite inlays, jade beads, a *Spondylus* shell, and beautiful propeller-shaped ear ornaments. Also found were a white limestone baton and an enigmatic paddle-shaped slate object (Fig. 8b). In the Belize Valley, these are referred to as slate "wrenches" and are presumed to be symbols of office. It is interesting to note that an unprovenienced carved-bone artifact that depicts the Pusilhá emblem glyph also is of this shape. Burial 6/2, found in a small crypt in the structural fill south of Burial 6/1,

Figure 11. Three jade pendants from a saq hunal *headdress that was discovered within the Burial 8/4 tomb. The top two pendants were found, along with many other jade items, in a basin in the northwest corner of the tomb. The bottom, fragmentary pendant is double sided (both sides are shown here), and was found both in the basin and in opposite corner of the tomb.*

contained the fragmentary flexed remains of a second individual. No grave goods were associated with Burial 6/2.

Excavations in the Acropolis: The Operation 3 and 8 Structures

The Gateway Hill Acropolis (Fig. 9) is one of the most imposing architectural complexes in the Maya world. The hill itself is a natural feature that was substantially modified to form a massive acropolis consisting of eight distinct terraces that rise to a height of 79 m. The main entrance to the acropolis is found south of the ancient bridge, where two parallel stair/terrace systems rise 30 m to the first terrace. Each of the ter-

Figure 12. Chipped stone eccentrics found associated with the Burial 8/4 tomb: an anthropoid chert eccentric found above and north of the tomb (a); two small obsidian eccentrics recovered within the tomb and just north of the interred individual (b); a small chert eccentric found with the two small obsidian eccentrics (c); and a large obsidian eccentric found in the center of the tomb (d).

races support a number of structures, and three pyramidal-like platforms are found at the top. A ramp or *sacbe* leads down from the first terrace to Ballcourt 2, one of four known at the site. An ancient toponym found in the Pusilhá inscriptions is read as "step mountain" (Prager 2002; 2003). This almost certainly refers to the acropolis itself.

In 2004, we excavated two platforms near the southern end of the acropolis. One of these, the Op. 4 structure, was badly looted just days before we arrived. For this reason, it is not discussed in detail here. One intriguing find associated with the Op. 4 structure was the cranium, neck, and partially articulated arm of an individual left on the final plaza floor. The head of Burial 4/1 was found below a capstone, and a smashed red ware vessel was placed nearby. The partially articulated remains suggest that the lower torso and limbs may have been dragged off by scavenging animals. It seems highly likely that the individual was left on the plaza during the Terminal Classic period.

In 2005, we excavated two of the largest pyramidal platforms at Pusilhá: the Op. 8 and Op. 9 structures. The second of these proved to be largely a natural bedrock feature

Figure 13. Modeled ceramic face, Op. 8/14/4.

covered with facing stones. It yielded very few artifacts. In contrast, the Op. 8 structure is an artificial platform that contained at least one important tomb of a divine ruler.

Excavation of the Op. 3 structure. The Op. 3 structure was built in one construction phase, and consists of a 2-m high platform with a central stair block flanked by two stair-side outsets (Fig. 10). Three burials – probably relating to a single interment – were found at the summit of the structure. A low wall, built directly on structural fill within the platform itself, passed in front of all three burials, as did a temporary earthen floor. We surmise that this temporary floor was used by people who attended the burial rites of all three principal individuals.

Like nearly all burials at Pusilhá, the central figure (Burial 3/1) was placed with his head in the north. Although not found in any well-defined crypt, his head was covered by a broken capstone. Accompanying grave goods include a plate found over his pelvis, the fragmentary remains of another vessel, and two companion heads (i.e., the skulls of additional individuals). One of these companion heads (along with additional bones from the proximal torso) was placed at the pelvis, and the other was found near the head of the primary figure. The second companion head was very fragmentary, but five teeth contained hematite inlays or had been drilled for such inlays.

Burials 3/1A and 3/1B were placed north and south of the central figure. In the case of the northernmost burial, no crypt or chamber had been prepared for the individual. Instead, a single, large capstone was placed at waist and leg level. The position of the body was flexed with the individual lying on the left side, facing east. The grave goods associated with Burial 3/1A include two vessels in proximity to the lower extremities and mid-section of this individual. Like other paired funerary vessels at Pusilhá, one was a plate and the other a drinking vessel, in this case a vase.

The southernmost burial, Burial 3/1B, was found south of the central figure in a simple crypt. The burial was extended, and the head of the individual was covered by a broken plate. A large cylinder vase with traces of polychrome paint also was recovered. Other grave goods encountered in Burial 3/1B include a thin fragment of a greenstone ornament, a small triangular fragment of greenstone that is polished on one side, and a single, complete forest-green bead. Additionally, 530 *jute* shells were recovered from this lot, as well as a bivalve fragment. All the ceramics recovered from Burials 3/1, 3/1A, and 3/1B date to the Late Classic period, specifically Tepeu II times.

A fourth burial, Burial 3/2, was found at the foot of the stairs of the Op. 3 structure. The principal body was interred within a crypt created by limestone uprights surmounted by capstones. The crypt itself was intrusive into the level of the plaza floor. That is, the burial postdates the construction of the Op. 3 Structure. A well-preserved adult individual was found in an extended, supine position. The upper canines and lateral incisors were all drilled for inlays, and central jade inlays were found in the upper right canine and upper left lateral incisor. Near the head, we recovered two almost complete vessels. One is a "brandy-snifter"-shaped cup carved outside with what appears to be pseudowriting. The other is a fine red-ware plate or dish with small molded ball-shaped foot supports and a filleted basal flange. Both of these forms date to the Terminal Classic. A

large, complete Belize Red plate was placed at the feet of the primary individual, also providing evidence that Burial 3/2 dates to the Terminal Classic period. In close proximity to this plate were the partial remains of a second individual. The second individual again represents a companion and consists of several skull fragments, teeth, a few long bones, and hand bones. These partial remains were crammed in a flexed position at the feet of the primary individual. It is possible that the primary individual in Burial 3/2 is a Terminal Classic descendent of the Late Classic principal figure interred in Burial 3/1.

We have exported three teeth from each of the primary individuals and companions in the Op. 3 burials, as well as the burials excavated in or in front of the Op. 4, Op. 5, and Op. 6 structures. We plan to conduct isotopic analyses to determine the place of origin of all 12 individuals, and also hope that DNA studies will provide evidence of biological relationship. In particular, we are interested in determining if the companions were revered ancestors of the principal individuals or if they were unrelated foreign captives.

Excavation of the Op. 8 structure. Our most intensive excavations were conducted in the Op. 8 structure, the largest free-standing platform known at Pusilhá. The fill of the Op. 8 structure is extremely unstable and precluded excavation below a depth of about three meters. Therefore, although no evidence of a substructure was found, we cannot completely rule out the possibility that one lies deeply buried within the platform. Four later, relatively minor modifications to the Op. 8 structure were noted. First, a large stair-side outset, resembling a buttress wall, was built against the southwestern body of the platform. Second, a smaller outset was added to the north side of the stair block, probably to stabilize it. Third, the northern end was expanded to join a low terrace abutting the Op. 9 structure. Finally, a low terrace or wall was built along the southeastern face of the platform, joining it to the Op. 3 structure and forming a room or small structure on the plaza level. Artifacts recovered from this final addition suggest that it dates to the Terminal Classic period.

The partial remains of two individuals were found shoved up against the south side of the Op. 8 structure and on the surface of the plaza. It is possible that one fragmentary set of remains, called Burial 8/2, represents the same individual identified as Burial 4/1. In this case, only the bottom half of the torso and legs were recovered. In sum, at the end of the occupation of the acropolis during the Terminal Classic period, at least two and possibly three individuals were left dead on the surface of the plaza.

A double interment, called Burial 8/3, was found in front of the stairs on the principal axis of the Op. 8 structure. This crypt burial contained an extended figure with two capstones over his head, a fragmentary red-ware vessel, and part of carved vessel in the "brandy-snifter" form. A second individual was found in a flexed position at the head of the extended figure. The ceramics tentatively suggest a Terminal Classic date.

The most important burial thus far excavated at Pusilhá was found at the top of the Op. 8 structure. Here, a large tomb, called Burial 8/4, was discovered among and just below the seven looter's pits that have destroyed most of the upper surface of the platform. The base of the tomb is approximately 2.5 m below this greatly disturbed surface. A single individual, consisting of very fragmentary remains, was found in what probably was

originally an extended position. A small antechamber originally provided access to the tomb from the southeast, but broken capstones and large-fill stones found in the tomb itself imply later re-entry from the top of the platform. Hundreds of obsidian fragments were found within the re-filled tomb as well as on its floor. These may have been deposited above the capstones before the tomb was re-entered, and later were re-incorporated into fill.

Grave goods include approximately a dozen vessels, all of which were found crushed by the stones used to fill the tomb. Most were found lined up on the east and north sides of the tomb. Many are polychrome or carved vessels. One basin, west of the head and at the northwest corner of the tomb, contained 24 complete jadeite beads, a crushed bead, two carved jade ornaments (Fig. 11, upper), a tubular bead, two appliques resembling large round eyes, and many mosaic pieces made of jade. In total, 81 fragmentary and whole jade artifacts were found in the basin. The beads belong to a necklace, and the two carved figures and at least some of the mosaic pieces seem to be part of the *saq hunal* headdress of a Maya ruler. Additional grave goods include two small obsidian eccentrics and a chert eccentric placed near the head, a large obsidian eccentric encountered near the center of the tomb (Fig. 12b-d), a very large *Spondylus* shell serving as capstone for the east-facing cranium, a fragment of pyrite, and a third carved jadeite figure (Fig. 11, lower), along with many more greenstone beads and a pearl bead, were found on the east side of the tomb. This double-sided pendant probably was the third and central element of the *saq hunal* headdress. A very small fragment of this last pendant was also found in the basin with the other two, suggesting that the third example was moved when the tomb was re-entered. A second *Spondylus* shell was found over the mouth and chin, and additional small greenstone and painted ceramic beads formed a necklace worn by the deceased. Finally, a large anthropomorphic eccentric made of chert was found above and north of the tomb (Fig. 12a). Although ceramic analysis has not yet begun, immediately identifiable forms date to Tepeu II or III times, that is, the 8th or early 9th centuries A.D.

Burial 8/4: identification and claims of Teotihuacan affiliation. The placement of the tomb, its later re-entry and backfilling, and especially the rich grave goods are all consistent with an interment of a member of the royal family. The *saq hunal* headdress implies that the individual within the tomb was, in fact, an *ajaw* or divine king. The identified ceramics and three carved jade pendants all are of a style dating to the 8th or early 9th centuries. In fact, the method used to drill the pendants is consistent with even later times (Karl Taube, personal communication 2005). In short, the implication is that the important individual in Burial 8/4 was one of the last *ajawob* of Pusilhá, perhaps Ruler G or one of the three Terminal Classic rulers about whom we know very little.

Although no hieroglyphic texts were found in the tomb, there are several intriguing hints that the *ajaw* in Burial 8/4 may be Ruler G. It is important to remember that he is the only late ruler of Pusilhá known to employ the **och'k'in kalo'mte'** title, which may suggest some sort of political, or more likely religious, link to Teotihuacan. The three jade pendants from the tomb are carved in a peculiar style. One (Fig. 11, upper right) has

snarled lips reminiscent of Tikal Stela 4 – an Early Classic monument famous for its Teotihuacan imagery – and of much earlier Olmec iconography. The four figures carved on the three pendants are all shown from a frontal position, perhaps borrowed from Teotihuacan stylistic conventions. One of the figures on the double-sided pendant has a face rendered in a particularly strong Teotihuacan style and also wears a Teotihuacan headdress (Fig. 11, lower left). Nevertheless, it is probable that all were produced by Maya artisans. Despite the use of foreign conventions and limited Teotihuacan icono-graphic content, the overall effect of the three pieces is Maya in character.

The large anthromorphic chert eccentric (Fig. 12a) is quite odd for the Maya area, but smaller ones are common at Teotihuacan, where they are thought to be symbolic (rather than actual) human sacrifices. A final clue that the inhabitant of Burial 8/4 claimed some sort of connection with Teotihuacan can be seen in a modeled clay fragment found elsewhere in the Op. 8 excavations (Fig. 13). This figure clearly wears the goggles of the central Mexican storm, Venus, and war god. It does not seem coincidental that the only representation of this sort from Pusilhá comes from the same structure as the Burial 8/4 tomb. In sum, although the evidence is not definitive, we suggest that the individual in the Burial 8/4 tomb was Ruler G, who died in the 8th century A.D. Other royal tombs have been found at sites such as Altun Ha, but if our identification is correct, this is the first time that the tomb and mortal remains of an ancient Maya ruler whose exploits are described in hieroglyphic texts have been discovered in Belize.

CONCLUSIONS

Four field seasons of archaeological and epigraphic investigations at Pusilhá have begun to answer our research questions, although the answers are not what we originally expected. Some ceramic data suggest an early Late Classic connection with Copán and other sites in the southeastern Mesoamerican periphery, but much stronger ties with the southern and southwestern Petén are evinced by both ceramic and epigraphic analysis. Our best guess is that most of the early settlers of Pusilhá came from the west rather than from the southeast. Moreover, Pusilhá continued to maintain economic ties with the southern and southwestern Petén throughout most of its history, apparently eschewing trade with the Valley of Belize until the Terminal Classic.

"Pull" factors that may have encouraged the dynastic founder **k'awil chan k'inich** to come to Pusilhá include available and under-inhabited land of high fertility, as well as the desire to control an important trade route between the Caribbean Sea and Usumacínta watershed. The importance of the foothills of the Maya Mountains as a place where caves drew religious pilgrims also may have been a factor. We further speculate that "push" factors for migration may have included political instability and warfare in the southwestern Petén. Such violence is well-described in numerous hieroglyphic texts dat-ing to this period. Although we have only negative evidence, it seems as though the rulers of Pusilhá deliberately kept themselves distant from the political struggles between both Tikal and Calakmul and Copán and Quiriguá. Many analogous "push" and "pull" factors exist today, and have contributed greatly to the influx of Q'eqchi' Maya in Toledo District.

Neither the dynamic model nor the superstate model are consistent with our data. Instead, there may have been a "third way" to state formation, one that we suspect was common in peripheral and frontier regions such as southern Belize. In these marginal and interstitial places, small regional states may have emerged after about A.D. 500 not because they were annexed by expansionist polities or compelled to enter a centuries-long conflict, but because of more peaceful reasons. Factors in the development of these secondary states might have included exchange and elite emulation, or, in a few cases, the colonization of previously underpopulated regions by groups fleeing from well-established polities.

As such secondary polities grew between larger states, it is likely that many were annexed by aggressively expansionist kingdoms such as Copán or were coerced into an alliance with Tikal or Calakmul. A few, however, may have seemed too distant, too underpopulated, or too impoverished to be worth the effort. That the many and lengthy hieroglyphic texts of Pusilhá do not even once mention the powerful kingdoms of Tikal, Calakmul, or Copán (and that these sites, in turn, do not mention Pusilhá) suggests that Pusilhá maintained its independence in a rather peripheral corner of the Maya world throughout its long history.

Like the ruling elite of other Maya cities, the divine leaders of Pusilhá occasionally faced crises of succession that led to the establishment of new dynastic lines. As at Tikal and Copán, the founders of these new dynastic lines – Pusilhá Ruler A and Ruler G – claimed an affiliation with distant and powerful Teotihuacan. In the case of Pusilhá that affiliation seems particularly incredible because both rulers lived at a time after the 4th- and 5th-century heyday of the central Mexican city. With the discovery of the tomb of an important *ajaw*, perhaps that of Ruler G himself, we now have a rich variety of ceramic and lithic artifacts that in future years may provide further data relevant to the question of external relations and the growth of Pusilhá: the largest Classic-period community of southern Belize.

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POVZETEK

Kraljestvo avokada: nedavne raziskave v Pusilháju, klasičnem majevskem mestu v južnem Belizeu

Od leta 2001 je Arheološki projekt Pusilhá preučil nekdanje naselbinske vzorce, reliefno obdelane spomenike, keramiko in arhitekturo pomembnega majevskega mesta v južnem delu države Belize v Srednji Ameriki. Naš namen je bil, da preverimo modele sekundarnega oblikovanja države in zunanjih povezav – najčešče formulirane z vidikov, ki temeljijo na osrednjih majevskih nižavjih – na perifernem ali mejnem območju. Raziskave so vključevale obsežno kartiranje, sondiranje ter tako horizontalna kot vertikalna izkopavanja. V sezoni 2005 je bil najden in izkopan grob pomembnega vladarja *K'uhul Un Ajaw*. Na osnovi naših epigrafskih in arheoloških analiz sklepamo, v nasprotju z našimi prejšnjimi pričakovanji, da Pusilhá ni nikoli bil pod politično ali ekonomsko prevlado svojih mogočnejših sosedov. To pomeni, da je v nekaterih predelih območja Majev utegnila biti pomembna "tretja pot" k sekundarnemu oblikovanju države, namreč takšna, ki ni bila odvisna od vpliva ustaljenih in autoritativnih držav.

Ključne besede: stari Maji, nastanek države, hieroglifska besedila, arheologija Belizea.