

PREFACIO

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(English version of preface to *Puertos marítimos en tierras bajas mayas: Estudio del patrón de distribución-abastacimiento de caracoles y conchas entre 700 y 1050 d.C.*, by Rafael Cobos. Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico. ~~In press.~~
to have been published in 2001.)

During the last decades of the 20th century, Maya archaeology underwent a revolution. Our understanding of the ancient peoples of Yucatan, Chiapas, Guatemala, Belize, and western Honduras and El Salvador has completely changed. We now know that sites such as Chichén Itzá, Uxmal, and Caracol were urbanized cities, and not the “vacant ceremonial centers” they once were thought to be. We also know that Maya agriculture was not as simple as we once depicted it. Although the “slash and burn” method was used in the past as it is today, Maya agriculture consisted of a complex mosaic of techniques and practices, some of which were quite labor intensive. We know, too, that the rulers of the ancient Maya were not passive and peaceful priests who devoted all their energies to a cult of the calendar and astronomy. Instead, like kings throughout the world, they were active agents who engaged in elaborate political plots and waged war in order to increase their wealth, power, and prestige.

Our new knowledge has emerged, in part, because of a series of spectacular breakthroughs and discoveries. In particular, recent advances in the decipherment of hieroglyphic writing have forever altered our conceptions of Maya kingship, warfare, and political organization. But the texts found on monuments erected by rulers – be they the stelae of the ancient Maya or the statues that commemorate more recent presidents – seldom tell us anything at all about economic organization. As a result, the more sensational achievements of the past quarter century of research have little advanced our understanding of prehistoric exchange and economic organization.

Ancient economy is best studied through more traditional analyses of artifacts. Through microscopic comparison and chemical assay, it is now possible to determine the origin of many classes of material goods,

particularly ceramics and obsidian tools. Data from such sourcing studies can be used to reconstruct ancient trade routes and exchange systems. In a quiet and subtle way, these techniques continue to revolutionize our understanding of Maya economy.

There is, perhaps, no single material that can provide data on ancient trade that has been more overlooked than shell. Shell artifacts, though fragile, preserve relatively well. Moreover they are found at nearly all sites, and appear in a wide variety of contexts reflecting the full spectrum of Maya society. In most cases, shell was used to make ornaments and other items of adornment, but it also was employed to make tools. Many of the shells used by the Maya come from coastal (rather than riverine or lacustrine) environments, so the presence of marine shell artifacts at inland sites necessarily implies both a system of procurement and trade. Finally, and most importantly, the Maya exploited a wide variety of species of shells. Because of their natural properties, particular species were favored as the raw material for specific types of artifacts. But many species have limited natural habitats. Certain shells are native to the Caribbean Sea, the Gulf of Mexico, the Pacific Ocean, and even smaller regions within these larger bodies of water. Unlike ceramics and obsidian artifacts, which usually are sourced using expensive scientific techniques, the species of shells found at a site can be determined through simple visual inspection. Thus, by identifying and quantifying the particular species of shell found in an archaeological collection, we can come to understand something about the extent of ancient economic interactions, particularly the relationship of inland sites to coastal areas.

The importance of this book lies in the fact that it is the first synthetic study of Maya shell artifacts from an explicitly economic perspective. Unlike earlier works, which tended to summarize shell data in taxonomic lists, Cobos’ volume considers shells not simply as artifacts, but as indicators of the political and economic relations between coastal and inland populations. The title, *Puertos Marítimos en Tierras Bajas Mayas*, reflects this broader concern with the role of coastal settlements in Maya economic and political organization.

During the Terminal Classic and Postclassic periods, large quantities of pottery, salt, obsidian, chert, food, cloth, honey, cacao, gold, and many other goods were traded up and down the coasts of the Yucatán peninsula in large, sea-going canoes. These items were carried to large inland centers following the same portage and communication routes that circulated shell. We can be sure that Cobos’ models of coastal-inland relations, based on the analysis of shell artifacts, will be of great interest to scholars who study the procurement and exchange of these other materials.