Step Mountain and the Kingdom of the Avocado: Engineering Marvels and Forgotten Hieroglyphs at Pusilha, Belize

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Introduction

Today, Toledo is often called the "Forgotten District" of Belize. But it was not always so. During the Classic Period (A.D. 250-850), Toledo District was home to at least four important Maya kingdoms (Figure 1). Today we call the capitals of these kingdoms Lubaantun, Nim Li Punit, Uxbenka, and Pusilha. The first two of these sites are known to Belizeans and tourists alike, but Pusilha - by far the largest ancient Maya city in southern Belize - is far less known (Figure 2).

Pusilha was one of the first major Maya cities to receive significant exploration in the 20th century. The site was rediscovered by a mahogany logger in 1927 and brought to the attention of a young archaeologist named J. Eric S. Thompson, who was working at nearby Lubaantun for the British Museum Expedition to British Honduras (Joyce 1929; Joyce et al. 1927, 1928). Because Pusilha had many carved monuments and Lubaantun virtually none, the British Museum team changed the focus of their attention to the more distant city. During their work, 10 carved stelae and two other monument fragments from Pusilha were sawn up, dragged through the jungle, and shipped to London where they now lie largely forgotten in a suburban storage facility of the British Museum (Figure 6; Gruning 1930, 1931).

In addition to the numerous carved monuments and ceramics discovered by the British Museum Expedition, one of the early discoveries that qualify Pusilha as a jewel of the Maya region is a magnificent and totally unique bridge crossing the Pusilha or Machaca River (Figure 3). This bridge, still used by the Q'eqchi' who inhabit the site, has no parallel in Maya engineering. In order to construct it, the ancient Maya first dug two diversion canals, forming two artificial islands on either side of the main river channel. Next, a coffer-dam was constructed between the two islands, and the entire flow of the river was shifted into the diversion canals. The drained main channel of the river was cutout in a V-shaped wedge forming a chute. Two pyramidal structures, the feet of the bridge, were built on the two artificial islands. Finally, the coffer dam was removed, allowing the river to go back into its main channel. The diversion canals, however, were left open and protect the bridge to this day from washing away during rainy season floods.

Despite these early discoveries, very few archaeologists or travelers have visited Pusilha since the 1930s, and it has become something of a forgotten gem (cf. Hammond 1975; Leventhal 1990). To a great extent, this is because of the extreme isolation of the site, far off from what we now call the Ruta Maya. Pusilha is located in southwestern Belize, just east of the international border and about

30 km from Modesto Mendez and San Luis Peten, Guatemala. Until quite recently, access to the site and the only communication link to the remote Q'eqchi' village of San Benito Poité was afforded by a poor and extremely difficult 17-km footpath through the Maya mountains. Today, a dirt road allows passage all year except

Pusilha Archaeological Project, which has completed four seasons of field investigations and two seasons of laboratory research, is to examine this isolated polity located in a peripheral area between better-known neighbors such as Caracol, Copan, and Quirigua. The specific aims of our project are: (1) to gain knowledge of the
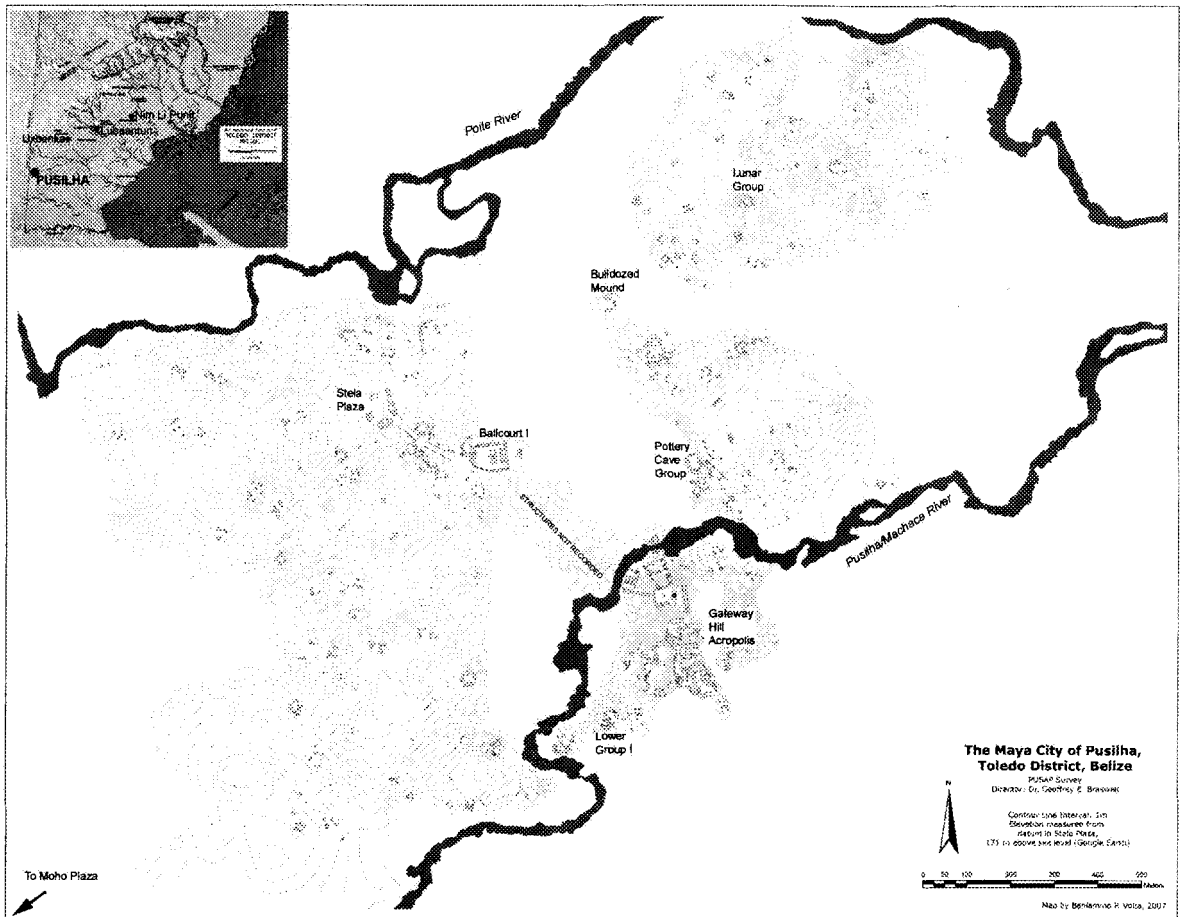

Figure 1. Partial map of Pusilha, Toledo District, Belize.

immediately after a heavy rain.

Although Pusilha is situated in a remote location, there can be little doubt that during much of the Classic period it was the largest and politically dominant city of the southern Belize region. The goal of the

political history of Pusilha through a thorough study of the hieroglyphic texts of the site; (2) to learn from where and why the first settlers of Pusilha may have come to Belize; and (3) to understand something of the political and economic relations between

Pusilha and its neighbors both within and beyond Toledo District (Bill and Braswell 2005; Braswell and Gibbs 2006; Braswell et al. 2004, 2005).

Archaeological Research at Pusilha

Our research program consists of five components: (1) systematic mapping of the 6 km² site; (2) test-pit and salvage excavations; (3) excavation of standing architecture; (4) epigraphic and iconographic analysis of the 46 carved monuments and monument fragments now known from Pusilha; and (5) the analysis of other artifacts such as pottery and stone tools.

Settlement Studies

An important aspect of research at Pusilha is the mapping of residential and special-function architecture throughout the site. Such maps allow archaeologists to estimate the size and population of ancient cities, and also provide glimpses into how the ancient Maya conceptualized their world. 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 Pusilha (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, more than 500 structures have been mapped in an area of more than 2 km² (Figure 1). The density of stone platforms in the region mapped so far is 220 structures/km², which in turn implies a population density of about 1,100 people per km². We therefore estimate that during the Late Classic period (A.D. 600-850), the population of the entire 6 km² settlement area of Pusilha might have been about 6,000 to 7,000 inhabitants. Pusilha was by no means a Maya city with a population like that of Caracol, but it certainly was larger than Xunantunich, Lubaantun, or Altun Ha.

At Pusilha, 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 and 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 (just off the southwest corner of Figure 1), the Lunar Group, the Stela Plaza, Lower Group I, and the Gateway Hill Acropolis. A common plan is shared by the first three of these architectural complexes. This plan includes 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 northern most 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 Peten, and Tikal. In other words, both the alignment and the specific patterning of structures that is replicated in these groups seem to be a distinguishing trait of the Southern Belize Region, if not a unique characteristic of Pusilha 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 or Maya road to a second group containing Ballcourt 1. Wendy Ashmore (1991; Ashmore and Sabloff 2002) has described certain cosmological principals that, in some cases, were incorporated into site planning. Specifically, 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 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

● **When?** Pusilhá was founded and first occupied at about A.D. 570. Most of the city was abandoned ca. A.D. 900, but some people stayed on until ca. A.D. 1100 or even later.

● **Who?** Pusilhá is a Maya city settled by people from the southern Petén. They may have been ancestors to the Mopan people of Guatemala and Belize.

● **How Big?** We estimate that at its peak the city was about 6 km² in size and contained 6,000 to 7,000 people.

● **How Many Monuments?** To date, we know of 21 carved stelae, four zoomorphic altars, three ballcourt markers, a hieroglyphic stair, and 17 other fragments. After Caracol, there are more hieroglyphic texts than at any other site in Belize.

● **How Many Ballcourts?** Four ballcourts have been discovered at Pusilhá.

● **What is the Largest Building?** The Gateway Hill Acropolis, a large palace and temple precinct, stands 79 meters high. It is built on and against a natural hill.

● **Is Pusilhá Open to Visitors?** Yes. Members of the San Benito Poité Pusilhá Tourism Committee will show you around. They will take you to the unique Maya Bridge and climb with you to the top of the acropolis. They will also show you various sculpture currently guarded in the Community Centre. Bring good boots and plenty of water!

● **How Do I Get There?** Pusilhá is located 41 miles from Punta Gorda in San Benito Poité Village. At Dump, head inland towards Mafredi Village. There, turn left (south) and drive through Blue Creek Village. Pass Jordan Village and cross the Jordan River. When you reach Santa Theresa Village, turn right (west) and drive the last 11 miles to San Benito Poité. If you can cross the bridge, drive all the way into the village and park at the Catholic Church. There you should see a sign for the Tourism Committee.

Figure 2. Pusilha at a glance.

Figure 3. Ancient bridge at Pusilha with modern suspension crossing.

consumed at Pusilha, and one of the most prevalent forms of household waste at the city) were recovered from test pits, suggesting that cooking, eating, and - by extension - daily living activities were not conducted at the Stela Plaza. The focus of the group is the large row of altars and stelae that depict the divine rulers of Pusilha 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 (Braswell et al.2004, 2005).

Excavations

In addition to a series of 25 test pits, we have excavated eight substantial structures at Pusilha (called the Operation 2-9 structures). The first of these, also known as the "Bulldozed Mound" (Figure 1), was nearly destroyed by modern construction activities in 2002. We now know that the final stage of the platform was built around A.D. 800 and occupied into and beyond the period known

as the "Maya Collapse." Today, all that remains is a smaller and older substructure that dates to the Late Classic period. This substructure was consolidated and stands next to the new Catholic Church in Poité Village (Braswell et al. 2004).

More extensive excavations were conducted in two structures of Lower Group I, located approximately 150 m southwest of the Gateway Hill Acropolis (Figure 1). Excavations revealed that group of structures were built, occupied and abandoned during the 8th century A.D. Two burials, including one of a child approximately four-years old, were found in the eastern structure of the group. This child wore a necklace made of simple shell beads and had two deciduous ("baby teeth") incisors inlayed with jade. Although upper-class Maya frequently inlaid their teeth with jade, this is the only known example found in a small child (Braswell et al. 2005).

The southernmost structure in Lower Group I contained an elaborate crypt containing the partial remains of an older male. Because many important bones were missing, the crypt is interpreted as a reburial. Also found in the crypt were a pyrite mirror with a slate back, hematite inlays, propeller-shaped shell ornaments, four painted vessels (one with hieroglyphs), a jade bead, a Spondylus shell, a white stone baton, and a slate "paddle." The pyrite mirror, baton, and "paddle" identify the individual - a non-royal member of the elite class - as an important war leader (Braswell et al. 2005).

Four more structures were excavated on top of the Gateway Hill Acropolis, the royal palace center of ancient Pusilha (Figure 4). The acropolis, built on the slopes of a natural hill, is the tallest ancient Maya construction in Belize, measuring 79 meters in height:

nearly the height of the Castillo of Xunantunich and the Caana of Caracol combined! An ancient hieroglyphic toponym (place name) that appears in the inscriptions of Pusilha is translated as "Step Mountain." Undoubtedly this is a reference to the two large staircases that rise up the Gateway Hill Acropolis.

Excavations in the Operation 3 Structure revealed four burials, three of which date to the 8th century. A fourth burial, found at the foot of the stair, date to sometime after A.D. 830. Three "companions," either the relics of revered ancestors or sacrificial victims, were found associated with the two central burials. We hope to conducted DNA and stable isotope analyses to discover if the individuals were related and if some of the "companions" might have come from rival polities in or beyond southern Belize (Braswell et al. 2005).

A triple burial - containing a man, woman, and child - was found at the foot of the Op. 8 Structure, the largest and most important pyramid on top of the Gateway Hill Acropolis. We believe that this may be a family burial (deposited with the child first, followed by the man, and then by the woman) that dates to the period of "collapse," or sometime after A.D. 830 (Braswell and Gibbs 2006).

The most important discovery made thus far at Pusilha is a royal tomb located at the top of the Op. 8 Structure. A total of thirteen fine polychrome and burnished ceramic vessels were found along the eastern edge of the tomb. East is the direction of resurrection and the ancient Maya believed that the heavens contained 13 levels. The vessels at the northern end of this row were brightly colored polychromes, while those at

the south were black or dark brown in color. For the Maya, black is associated with the south, the dark underworld where the sun is located at night. Thus, the pottery in the tomblike architectural plan of Pusilha reflects ancient Maya beliefs about the structure of the universe. Obsidian eccentrics, made of exotic volcanic glass imported from central Mexico and chipped in Teotihuacán-inspired designs, also were found in the tomb. Finally, more than 200 jade artifacts were recovered, including two necklaces and the three diadems that formed the royal Saq Hunal headdress of a Maya king (Figure 5; Braswell and Gibbs 2006). Two of these diadems as well as the largest necklace currently are on display at the Belize City Museum.

Several lines of evidence suggest that the dead king buried in the tomb is "Ruler G" of Pusilha (see below), who died sometime between A.D. 731 and A.D. 751. If we are correct in this identification, it is the first time that the burial of an ancient Maya king whose exploits are known and described in hieroglyphic texts has been discovered in Belize.

The Hieroglyphic Texts of Pusilha

To date, forty-six sculpted monuments and monument fragments have been found at Pusilha. This corpus includes at least 21 carved stelae and stelae fragments, three zoomorphic ("animal shaped") altars, three Ballcourt monuments, a hieroglyphic and figural stair, and 18 carved fragments. The last category includes pieces of what 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 at the site. Twenty-two of the carved monuments and fragments contain hieroglyphic texts. Epigrapher and project co-director Christian Prager (2002) has presented a detailed epigraphic analysis of the inscriptions of Pusilha, a portion of 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 (Figure 6). 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. The ancient name for the kingdom appears in the Pusilha emblem glyph, and is read as UN (avocado). Thus the rulers of the site were called "Divine Lords of the Avocado" kingdom. As previously mentioned, a toponym that Prager has noted, as "Step Mountain", seems to refer to the city of Pusilha or more likely to the Gateway Hill Acropolis.

Seven lords and a lady ruled Pusilha from A.D. 570 until some time after A.D. 751. The historic account at Pusilha starts

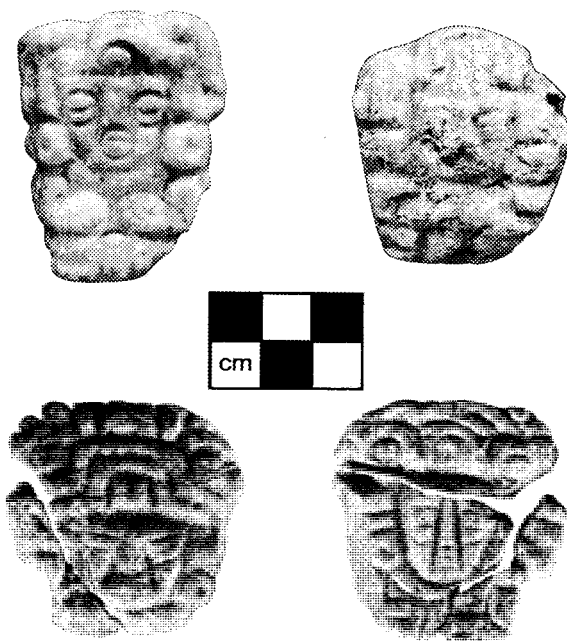**Figure 4.** Gateway Hill Acropolis, Pusilha, showing locations of excavated structures.

Figure 5. Three jade diadems (the bottom photo shows both sides of a double sided image) from the royal tomb of the Op. 8 Structure, Pusilha.

with Ruler A whose name glyph is read k'awil chan k'inich (Figure 6, Stelae P and D:C5-D5, G5-H5). He ascended the throne on 9.6.17.8.18 (Figure 6, Stela P:C4-C6), and celebrated the 9.8.0.0.0 period ending as a four 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.

Ruler A's successor was called k'ak' u ti' chan, and is nicknamed Ruler B (Figure 6, Stela D:H13). His hieroglyphic name is identical to that of his powerful contemporary, Copan Ruler 11. This raises the possibility that they were one and the same person. But since Ruler B of Pusilha 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 Pusilha. Nontheless, hieroglyphic and iconographic evidence point to the fact that Pusilha 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 Pusilha, 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" (Figure 6, Stela P: 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.

Ruler C acceded to power and celebrated the k'atun ending 9.11.0.0.0 (Figure 6, Stela H:A14-A15). 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' hun ... aj ...; Figure 6, Stela K:pF5-pF9) celebrated the 9.12.0.0.0 k'atun ending. 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" (Figure 6, Stela K:pC6), which perhaps is an ancient name for the city of El Mirador (Guenter 2003). The actor in this mythical celebration is "Foliated Ajaw" (Figure 6, Stela K:pC3), a legendary person mentioned at Copan, Tikal, and elsewhere. A fascinating body of textual evidence associates "Foliated Ajaw" (also called "Decorated Ajaw" or "Leaf Ajaw") with the origins of Maya kingship in the Late Preclassic (Guenter 2003). By re-enacting this legendary k'atun celebration, perhaps representing the birth of kingship itself, Ruler D legitimized his power in the same mythical language employed on the nearly contemporary Stela I of powerful Copan.

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). On 9.14.0.0.0, however, an individual nicknamed Ruler E set up Stela M at Pusilha (Figure 6). 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; Figure 6, Stela E:Ep6-Ep7) became divine ruler of Pusilha. The date of her accession is not recorded, but because her son, Ruler G (Figure 6, Stela E:Ep3-Fp3), erected Stela E on 9.15.0.0.0, it must have occurred during the previous k'atun. Given that her parents are not mentioned, it remains unclear if Ruler F was the daughter of Ruler E. She probably reigned only until her son 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 is not described as an ajaw of Pusilha. The paternal grandfather of Ruler G was named hun ew chak muyal chan yoa:t ?ti' k'awil, and was an important noble from an unidentified site. Segments of this name phrase appear also at Naranjo, Copan, and Quirigua, suggesting that he came from somewhere in the eastern or southeastern lowlands.

Stela F (Figure 6) was erected in A.D. 751, after the death of Ruler G. For this reason, he must have died during the previous 20 years (i.e., some time after the erection of Stela E). Two reasons that we strongly suspect that the royal tomb of the Op. 8 Structure pertains to Ruler G are that ceramic dates place the burial in the middle of the 8th century and that the individual in the tomb is an elderly male consistent with the age of Ruler G. Moreover, several items in the tomb seem to suggest a claim of alliance with a Teotihuacán-centric cult. Ruler G's hieroglyphic texts link him to the important ochk'in kalomte' title, which some epigraphers see as originally indicating a tie to the distance central Mexican city.

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 6, Stela F:A5) scattered liquid in celebration of the k'atun ending 9.16.0.0.0. (A.D. 751). This individual, however, is not explicitly described as a ruler. A final individual whose now erased name is linked to the Pusilha emblem glyph is mentioned on the hieroglyphic stair, which probably dates to 9.18.7.10.3 (A.D. 798).

The political history of Pusilha stands out for its antagonistic nature. There is textual and iconographic evidence (in the form of depictions of bound captives) for 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.

It is curious that the emblem glyphs of Copan, Quirigua, Tikal, Caracol, Calakmul and other major powers do not appear at Pusilha. We should be cautious, then, in interpreting every act of Maya warfare as a skirmish in the centuries-long conflict between Calakmul and Tikal.

Elsewhere, using ceramic evidence -we have argued that Pusilha might have been founded by refugees from the southwestern Peten (Braswell et al. 2005). It may be that the rulers of Pusilha carefully guarded their independence and avoided direct political and military interaction with their more bellicose neighbors. Also curious is the lack of hieroglyphic references to nearby Nim Li Punit and Uxbenka. But both of these polities are much smaller than Pusilha and may not have merited direct mention; Maya inscriptions typically emphasize larger neighbors rather than less-powerful allies. The inscriptions from Lubaantun are very limited, and it is not clear if that site had an emblem glyph. Thus, if Lubaantun is mentioned in the Pusilha inscriptions, we might not know it. In any event, Lubaantun seems to have flourished, for the most part, after the decline of Pusilha.

Ceramics

Project ceramicist and co-director Cassandra Bill has divided the ceramic chronology of Pusilha into four phases (Bill and Braswell 2005). Material pertaining to the earliest phase, dating to the 7th century, is known to us primarily from only one context:

Pottery Cave (Figure 1). The pottery we excavated from this disposal site was "mixed"; not only does it appear with later 8th century materials, but also it was recovered from the backfill of the British Museum project of the late 1920s. The vast majority of the sherds show close affinities with materials known from the Peten. In short, the ceramics from Pottery Cave may be considered a mixed Tepeu I/Tepeu II assemblage (i.e., A.D. 600-830). Jars with striated or impressed designs, many of which closely resemble examples of Pantano Impressed from the southwestern Peten, are particularly common. Small quantities of ceramics, including examples of Masica Incised, almost certainly were imported from western Honduras, perhaps from Copan itself. Also found in this mixed Late Classic assemblages are a few examples of polychromes with the "twist and bud" motif, a design element known from eastern El Salvador and elsewhere in the southeastern Mesoamerican periphery. Most of the polychromes from Pusilha, however, share forms and general surface-treatment attributes that are clearly related to established groups such as the Saxche-Palmar Orange polychromes of the Pasion and central Peten regions. None of the local ceramic types so well known from western Belize are present in either the mixed Tepeu I/II context of Pottery Cave, or in the many unmixed Tepeu II contexts that we have excavated.

Unlike materials from Pottery Cave, our unmixed 8th century Tepeu II (A.D. 700-830) ceramics from Pusilha - with the exception of one vessel - lack connections to Honduras and El Salvador. This may in part be due to surface preservation; materials from Pottery Cave are remarkably preserved while ceramics from most other contexts at the site are not. An interesting feature of the Late Classic and Terminal Classic ceramic assemblage is the presence of comales. These are relatively common at Pusilha and at sites in the Upper Pasion Region and the Dolores Valley to the west. They are not described for nearby Lubaantun or Uxbenka (Hammond 1975; Andrew Kincaid, personal communication 2007) and are generally uncommon, rare, or unknown in the northern Peten. The presence of comales at Pusilha and in parts of the southern Peten may indicate a distinct food-way, and perhaps identity, practiced in this region. Moreover, the marked difference in this regard between Lubaantun and Pusilha may indicate that in ancient times, identity in Toledo District was as complex as it is today.

The Terminal Classic ceramic assemblage of Pusilha is dominated by Tepeu III (after A.D. 830) types, forms, and modes. Nevertheless, imports and copies of foreign vessels appeared during this period. For the first and only time in its history, ceramics from the Belize Valley, such as Belize Red, were brought to Pusilha. Also fairly common during the Terminal Classic are copies, probably local, of Fine Orange vessels and forms from the northwestern Maya region.

The Pusilha ceramic sequence ends with a Postclassic assemblage of uncertain date. The Postclassic pottery of Pusilha is crude and unstandardized and therefore reminiscent of, but not necessarily related to, similar Postclassic assemblages from many sites in the Maya lowlands.

In sum, the ceramics of Pusilha firmly establish the site within the Late Classic Tepeu sphere of the Peten. The closest
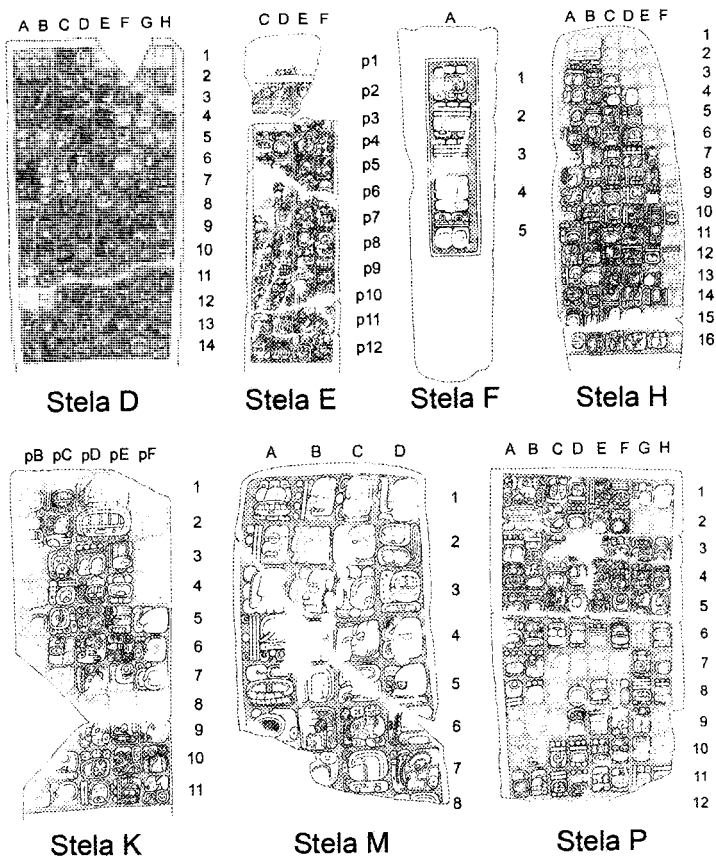
Figure 6. Stelae from Pusilha, Belize, now in the British Museum. Illustration by Christian Prager.

affinities appear to be with sites in the southeastern and, especially, southwestern Peten. During the 7th century, that is, the first 100 or so years of occupation, a very limited quantity of pottery was imported from western Honduras. Some, but by no means the majority, of the polychromes dating to this period have decorative elements that are much more reminiscent of eastern El Salvador and Honduras than of the Peten heartland. Thus, economic and cultural connections with sites to the southeast appear to have been strongest during the first half of the Late Classic and diminished during the 8th century. Although there are many

ceramic similarities shared between Lubaantun and Pusilha, there are also some significant differences. We speculate that the presence of comales at Pusilha and the lack of this form at Lubaantun imply both different site histories and identities.

Conclusion

Pusilha is one of the forgotten jewels of Belizean archaeology. With at least 46 carved monuments and monument fragments, it's artistic and hieroglyphic (and hence, historical) record is surpassed only by Caracol. Although not nearly as large as Caracol, the urban area of Pusilha was larger

than most well-known Maya sites in the nation. The ancient bridge (Figure 3) crossing the Pusilha/Machaca rivers is unique in Maya architecture, and the 79-m high acropolis must have been one of the most imposing architectural monuments in the Maya world.

Although we once knew very little about Pusilha, we now understand something of its history. The earliest permanent settlers founded the city in the late 6th century A.D., about 200 or more years after the founding of nearby Uxbenka but apparently before the founding of Lubaantun (we know very little about the history of Nim Li Punit, other than the fact that it was at its peak during the 8th century A.D.). Unlike the rulers of Uxbenka, who may have come from Tikal (see Wanyerka n.d), it seems likely to us that the inhabitants of Pusilha came from the southwestern Peten. One way that this difference is reflected is in pottery: the people of Pusilha made tortillas on comales, while those of Lubaantun and Uxbenka did not. That is, ancient Toledo District was a culturally diverse region just like it is today. We speculate that Pusilha might have been founded by people fleeing political and military strife in that region, and who were looking for under populated and rich arable land. In this respect, the ancient inhabitants of Pusilha, were much like the modern Q'eqchi' in Toledo District.

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