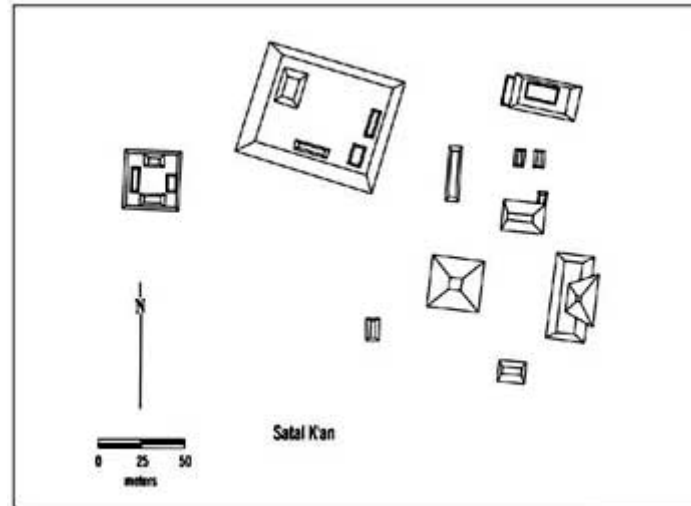


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The Eastern Riverine Corridor During the Late Classic Period



Research Year: 1998

Culture: Maya

Chronology: Late Classic

Location: Hill Bank Sector, Belize

Site: New River Lagoon

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Introduction

The New River Lagoon Settlement Study was initiated in 1998 and completed in 1999, with funding from the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc. (FAMSI) and the University of Wisconsin–La Crosse. The research area is located

along the southern banks of the New River Lagoon, located in the Hill Bank sector of the Programme for Belize Reserve (PfB), a 260,000+ acre wildlife conservation area situated in northwestern Belize ([Figure 1](#)). The study area lies east of San José (Thompson 1939, 1966) and south of Lamanai, a major Maya city that was continuously occupied from the Preclassic through the historic periods (Pendergast 1977, 1981a, 1981b, 1981c, 1986). The region is important to our understanding of the development and decline in Maya polities because it links the settlements along the New River with major centres further east and, no doubt, was integral to coastal-inland trade.

The escarpments to the northwest of the study area demarcate a boundary between the New River drainage basin and the Classic Maya states of the Petén. Exemplifying this border are the differences between the occupational history and ceramic inventory noted at La Milpa (Guderjan 1991; Grube and Hammond 1998; Hammond 1991; Hammond and Bobo 1994; Hammond and Tourtellot 1993; Hammond, *et al.* 1996; Tourtellot, *et al.* 1993; Tourtellot and Rose 1993; Tourtellot, *et al.* 1996; Tourtellot, *et al.* 1994) and Lamanai (Pendergast 1977, 1981a, 1981b, 1981c, 1986). In general, ceramic assemblages recovered from the New River drainage basin at Lamanai and nearby sites show more affiliation with those from the Belize Valley and northeastern Belize (Howard and Graham 1998; Powis 2001).¹ In contrast, ceramic assemblages located on the escarpment plateaus show a marked affiliation with ceramics from the Central Petén, especially during the Early Classic (Sullivan 2002). And both Graham (2002) and Sullivan (2002) have remarked upon the intra-regional integration seen in the ceramic assemblages of Lamanai and the Three Rivers Region, respectively, during the Late Classic. Further, Lamanai was occupied as early as 900 B.C. and continued, unabated, until the historic period (Pendergast 1981a). This contrasts with the later initial occupation of the uplands area at approximately 300 B.C.² In addition, the population in this region experiences the same dramatic decline that is evident throughout the central Petén at about A.D. 800.

Given such a dramatic physical boundary between the two regions as well as the distinct occupational histories of the major centres in each, we hypothesized that the two areas may have been both socially and politically distinct. In other words, were these two regions organized in similar fashions or do we see evidence for socio-political variation?

¹ In addition to affiliations with the Belize River valley and northeastern Belize, Walker (1990) has also noted a clear Yucatecan influence on the Cerros ceramic assemblage (at the mouth of the New River). This influence is present in the Preclassic and Early Classic assemblages and markedly prominent during the Late Classic, when the site was briefly reoccupied. An especially strong association has been found between Cerros and Becán during the Protoclassic and is characterized by the presence of Zapatista Trickle, a predominantly Yucatecan type (Reese-Taylor and Walker 2002b; Walker 2000).

² While the earliest dates recovered thus far suggest an initial occupation at about 400 B.C. (Sullivan 2002:200), research continues in northwestern Belize and it is possible that earlier sites may be located.



Figure 1. Programme for Belize Reserve (~260,000 acres).

Recent research in northeastern Guatemala by the Río Azul Project and the Ixcario Archaeological project (Adams 1981, 1990, 1999; Adams, ed. 1986, 1987, 1989, 2000; Turner, *et al.* 1981), as well as research in the northwestern sector of Belize by the Three Rivers Archaeological Project (Adams and Valdez, ed. 1993, 1995; Dunning, *et al.* 1999; Durst 1996; Houk 1996; Kunen 2001; Lewis 1995; Lohse 2001; Manning 1997; O'Neal 1999; Robichaux 1995; Scarborough 1998; Scarborough, *et al.* 1995; Sullivan 1997, 2002; Tovar 1996; Valdez, ed. 1999; Walling, *et al.* 1995), the La Milpa archaeological project (Hammond 1991; Hammond and Bobo 1994; Hammond and Tourtellot 1993; Hammond, *et al.* 1996; Tourtellot, *et al.* 1993; Tourtellot and Rose 1993; Tourtellot, *et al.* 1994; Tourtellot, *et al.* 1996), the Blue Creek archaeological project (Grube, *et al.* 1995; Guderjan, ed. 1991; Guderjan and Driver, ed. 1995; Guderjan, *et al.*, ed. 1996), and the Chan Chich archaeological project (Houk 1998a, 1998b; Valdez 1998) has produced a wealth of data on the socio-political organization of the northeastern Petén region. Further, this research has focused on both large centres and their interstices, giving us a well-rounded picture of the region.

In addition, recent research at the long-lived centre of Lamanai has produced a clear picture of the significance of the city as the capital of a powerful kingdom that controlled trade along the New River throughout most of its history (Pendergast 1977, 1981a, 1981b, 1981c, 1986). However, few archaeological investigations have been conducted in the surrounding areas (Guderjan, *et al.*, ed. 1996).

Consequently, the main research focus of the New River Settlement Study was to examine the social and political organization of sites within the Lamanai sphere of influence. Further, did the socio-political organization of the southern New River drainage differ significantly from that seen in the Petén uplands? To address these questions, we formulated two research goals that could be completed within a single season: First, we would document the settlement in the region surrounding the southwestern margins of the New River Lagoon; and second, we would map the site of Satal K'an, a small center located approximately 5 km west of Hill Bank.

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Results of the Survey

We commenced the investigations by documenting sites previously reported by PFB rangers. Two small sites were recorded on the southwestern banks of the New River Lagoon, just south of Irish Creek. The northern site consisted of two large platforms surrounding a plaza. Each platform served as a base for superstructures that were composed of stone foundations with pole and thatch walls. The height of each structure is approximately 4 m. Large looters' trenches bisect both structures and Late Preclassic pottery was observed in each.

The more southerly site consisted of a small plazuela group. And further survey along the shoreline revealed no other sites.

Secondly, we focussed on mapping the small settlement of Satal K'an. As we discovered during the course of the survey, Satal K'an is one of the larger settlements in the region, with two discrete groups of structures. It was located on a rise amidst surrounding low-lying bajos. Based upon surface ceramics, it appears as though the final construction phase of the site dates to the Late Classic period (A.D. 600-800). Group A consists of a large open plaza surrounded by large structures ([Figure 2](#)). On the west is a tall pyramidal structure; directly across from this building is a long platform, oriented N-S and surmounted by three smaller buildings. This is an E-Group arrangement, commonly found in the north central Petén near the El Mirador basin, as well as in the southern Campeche region (Clark and Hansen 2002; Hansen 1998). However, this layout is more unusual in the eastern Maya lowlands.

A small ballcourt is located in Group B, just north of Group A. The ballcourt provides a transition between the low-lying structure at the north of Group A, and the probable residential structure at the north of Group B. In addition to the more public plazas, two large plazuela groups and several smaller residential mounds were located.

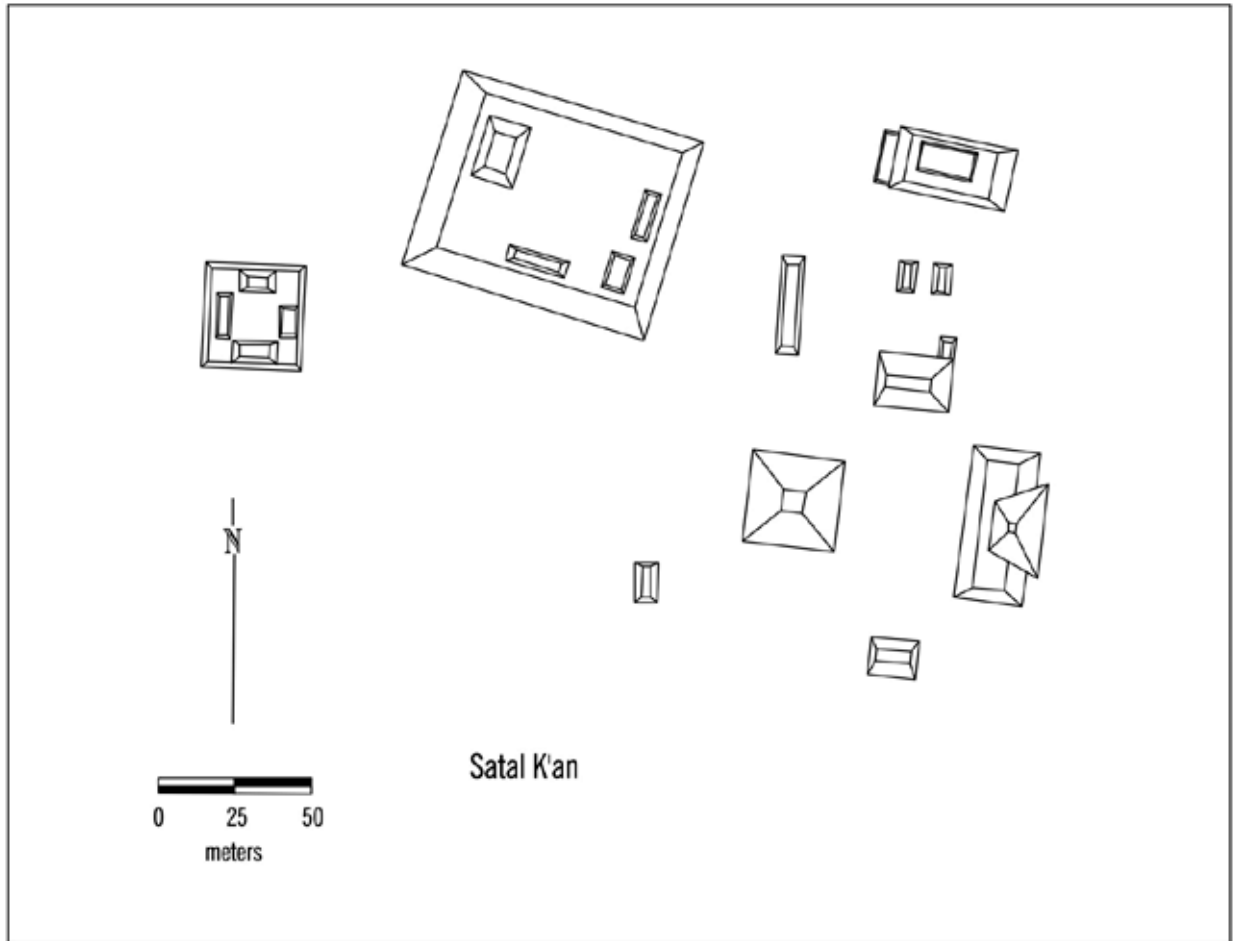


Figure 2. Satal K'an, Group A, by K. Reese-Taylor, M. Rich, A. Jordan, and R. Taylor.

Discussion

While Satal K'an is well situated to take advantage of the portage route between the New River Lagoon and sites further inland, such as San José, the region, in general, is more sparsely populated than previously anticipated. This suggests that the area was not the main portage route into the Petén.

Interestingly, while on survey, John Masson and Ben Thomas, both employees of the PfB, commented on the passage from the New River to the Belize River drainage during the rainy season. Apparently, the waters of Dawson Creek rise to a level that would have allowed canoes to pass from the New River into the Western Lagoon. From this vantage point, boats could follow one of several waterways that drain into the Belize River, including the Southern Lagoon and Black Creek ([Figure 3](#)). Additionally, the southernmost point of Spanish Creek, which flows north into the Western Lagoon, lies

within two miles of Labouring Creek, another watercourse leading west into the interior of the eastern Petén.

The settlement along the New River Lagoon and the Belize River also suggests that this route was well-travelled. Very few settlements appear south of Lamanai on the shore of the New River Lagoon, while in contrast, several small settlements have been documented along the Southern Lagoon and Spanish Creek. In addition settlement densities along the Belize River rise west of the Belize River and Labouring Creek confluence.

By utilizing this system of interlocking waterways, traders would not need to portage for any great distance in order to reach sites in the interior, especially during the rainy season. Indeed, by following the interlocking watercourses, one could travel by canoe from the coast at Santa Rita to within 15 kms of Caracol: New River to Dawson Creek, Dawson Creek to Western Lagoon, Western Lagoon to Southern Lagoon, Southern Lagoon to Belize River, Belize River to either the Mopán River or the Eastern Branch, both leading to the Vaca Plateau and Caracol ([Figure 3](#)).

Importantly, there are indications that Calakmul used this route to establish domination of the eastern trade routes during the Late Classic period. One of the first signs of Calakmul's presence along this route appears in the texts of Altar 21 from Caracol (Chase and Chase 1989; Grube 1994; Houston 1991). Calakmul is mentioned as the victor in a war waged against Tikal in A.D. 562 (Martin and Grube 2000:90). The prominent reference to this event implies that Caracol was directly involved, perhaps serving as a staging ground for Calakmul. However, we suggest that in order to enter Caracol, Calakmul travelled via the eastern rivers' interlocking system, rather than the overland course through Tikal-controlled territory.

Other signs of control, or at least access to the eastern river route, are reflected in the architectural influence exerted by Calakmul on sites along the waterways. During the Late Classic period (A.D. 600-800), Structures N10-43 (Pendergast 1981a: Figure 13) and N10-9 at Lamanai (Pendergast 1981a: Figure 5) and Caana at Caracol display an architectural style similar to that of Calakmul, particularly Structure II and Structure IV. This style consists of a large truncated platform with broad central staircases, often interrupted by a parallel row of rooms across the front. In the cases of Structure IV at Calakmul and Caana at Caracol, both are crested by a triadic group, reminiscent of the truncated platforms and triadic groupings constructed during the Late Preclassic.



Figure 3. Map showing interlocking waterways.

Additionally, the layout of Group A at Satal K'an; Groups A and B at Caracol; and Group A at Minanha (Iannone 1999:104) all resemble the layout of the Central Plaza at Calakmul. Each of these plazas contains an E-group. A slate stela is erected at the base of the middle, eastern structure in the E-groups of Minanha (Iannone 1999), Caracol (Beetz and Satterthwaite 1981), and Calakmul (Ruppert and Denison 1943)³ The slate stela at Calakmul is Stela 9, which was dedicated in 9.11.10.0.0. (A.D. 662) (Ruppert and Denison 1943:102). This places Stela 9 within the late reign of Yuknoom the Great.⁴ The range of dates on this stela (from 9.10.16.0.0 to 9.12.0.0.0) coincides with the greatest extent of Calakmul's influence.⁵ An E-group is also found at Naranjo, and may be associated with the conquest of that site by Caracol and Calakmul in A.D. 626 and 631, respectively (Martin and Grube 2000:72). The status of Caracol and Naranjo as close allies of Calakmul was in effect until the early part of the 8th century and was, doubtless, instrumental in maintaining control of the eastern waterways.⁶

Finally, movement of resources from the Maya Mountains to sites such as Calakmul must have taken place via the eastern river route defined herein. Clearly, the river route that connected Caracol and Calakmul must have been the main avenue of transportation for the large piece of slate (3m x .5m x .15m) used to carve Stela 9, as well as smaller objects, such as the carved mirror-back, also made of slate and recovered from Calakmul (Martin and Grube 2000:104). Slate in the form of mirror backs has been found in burials and caches at Lamanai (Graham 2002:405-409).

The tactical advantage that control of the New River-Belize River route brought to Calakmul cannot be underestimated, as it was integral to trade between the central Petén and the coast. This control forced Tikal to trade with other areas, including the northern lowlands and the Guatemalan highlands, using more costly paths, such as the overland route that passes to the south through Cancuén and to the west via the circuitous Usumacinta route. Even more problematic, Tikal's control of these southern and western routes was heavily dependent on an amicable relationship with sites in the region, such as Dos Pilas and Cancuén. And when these relationships broke down (Fahsen 2002; Martin and Grube 2000:109), control of these routes also fell into the

³ Gyles Iannone first noted the remarkable similarities between the E-groups at both Minanha and Caracol, and specifically the slate stela in the mid-line of the eastern structures (Iannone 1999:104).

⁴ According to Martin and Grube (2000:109), this stela is attributed to Yuknoom the Great; though they also note that it is one of the pieces of evidence that points to joint reign with his son during his later years, as the portrait of Yuknoom Yich'aak K'ak graces the front face of Stela 9.

⁵ During his reign, Yuknoom the Great counted among his allies and vassals the lords of El Perú, Cancuén, Dos Pilas, Piedras Negras, Naranjo, Caracol, and Moral.

⁶ While the exact meaning denoted by the distribution of E-groups during the Classic period remains unclear, there is little doubt that a very significant relationship among Calakmul, Caracol, and Minanha was signaled by the parallel placement of slate stelae within these particular architectural arrangements. Stela 9 at Calakmul was dedicated first (A.D. 662), and Stela 21 from Caracol was dedicated in A.D. 702, some 40 years later (Beetz and Satterthwaite 1981). The dedication date of the Minanha stela is unknown. Despite the differences in dedication dates, the three slate stelae symbolically cross reference each other, and hence would have served as important visual reminders of the power and influence that the three allies enjoyed during the reign of Yuknoom the Great.

hands of Calakmul. Therefore, without access to the coast, Tikal was effectively cut off from its major trading partners throughout Mesoamerica and, consequently, from critical supplies such as salt. Calakmul gained the upper hand, at least for a short time.

Conclusions

In conclusion, while the settlement survey of the New River Lagoon did not record the population densities expected, the confirmation of a water route from the New River drainage into the Belize River drainage did lead to insights into the political differences apparent between the Petén uplands and the New River drainage basin. Based upon the architectural similarities; the consistencies in site lay-out; and epigraphic and material evidence (such as the slate stelae) linking Calakmul and Caracol, the New River drainage basin seems to have been integrated into the Calakmul sphere for most of the Late Classic period.

In contrast, upon scaling the escarpments—the natural boundary between the coastal lowland and the Petén upland—one finds distinctions that are consistent with strong ties to Tikal. Public architecture is in the Petén style at sites such as La Milpa, Dos Hombres, and Ma'ax Na. Further site lay-outs do not replicate plans seen at Calakmul, nor were E-groups constructed (Houk 1996). Finally, no material correlates of a strong association with Caracol, such as slate stela, have been recovered.

These differences may have a long history, beginning in the Preclassic, if the E-groups are a diagnostic feature of the distinctions. If such is the case, then the Classic period struggles between Tikal and Calakmul are not enough to account for the contrasts. Epigraphers and archaeologists have recently suggested that ethnic differences may have existed between the populations of the northern Petén and southern Yucatán and those of the central Petén, with the more northerly group representing Yucatecan speakers and the more central group consisting of Ch'olti'an speakers (Schele and Freidel 1990; Guenter n.d.; Hansen, personal communication, 2002; Lacadena and Wichmann 2002; Mathews 2002; Reese-Taylor and Walker 2002a). Is it possible that ethnic differences might also underlie the differences in this region as well? Were the populations of the New River drainage ethnically Yucatecan and those of the Petén uplands Ch'olti'an, or do the differences reflect ethnic groups who speak distinct Ch'olti'an dialects as proposed by Wichmann (2002)? While it is unwise to base ethnic identification on linguistic affiliation alone, the combination of linguistic and archaeological evidence may enable scholars to determine if such ethnic differences did exist in the past and would prove a fruitful avenue for future study.

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