A major debate in Maya archaeology has centered on the nature of its political organization during the Classic period (AD 250–950): was the Maya state centralized or decentralized (Chase and Chase 1996; Demarest 1996; Fox et al. 1996; Houston 1993; J. Marcus 1993; Sharer 1993; Stuart 1993)? However, more recent treatises have underscored the dynamic nature of Classic Maya political institutions (Demarest 1996; J. Marcus 1998; Iannone 2002; Sharer and Golden 2004). The “dynamic model” proposed by J. Marcus (1998) affirms that all ancient civilizations have cycled between periods with highly centralized, territorially extensive states and periods of fragmentation with small-scale decentralized (or weakly centralized) polities (J. Marcus 1998). But Iannone (2002) signals that the dynamic model leaves the question of causality in Maya political dynamics unanswered. To approach this question, we must shift from simple and generalized concepts such as “centralization” and “decentralization” to the actual political practices and mechanisms used by active political actors and/or factions to gain more power and to pursue their agendas within their individual polities (Brumfiel and Fox 1994; Ehrenreich, Crumley, and Levy 1995; Blanton 1998; Carmack 1981; Claessen 1984; Earle 1997, 2001; Feinman 1998; Urban and Schortman 2004; A. Smith 2003; see also Foias 2003, 2007).

One mechanism deployed by ancient elites to advance their political power was control over economic matters. The relationship between political and economic power is crucial to our reconstruction of the nature of Maya states and of the trajectory of this pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican civilization. The Motul de San José Archaeological Project, a long-term interdisciplinary research program, was formulated to provide a better understanding of the intersection between economics and politics from...
the perspective of one Classic Maya center within the larger context of the southern Maya lowlands. The first phase of research explored the site of Motul de San José and its periphery between 1998 and 2005. Designed to set the groundwork to address the issues of political relationships and economic controls, the first phase involved settlement surveys, a focused sampling of the central and peripheral settlement, strategic excavations of small to large residential units, and the analyses of artifact collections. This volume presents the results of this first phase of research.

Motul de San José in Maya Archaeology

Although Central Petén has attracted a great deal of archaeological attention over the last century (e.g., W. Coe 1965a, 1965b, 1990; Coggins 1975; Culbert 1991, 1993; Sabloff 2003; Fedick and Ford 1990; Ford 1986; Harrison 1999; Jones 1991; Jones and Satterthwaite 1982; Laporte and Fialko 1995; Maler 1908–10; Morley 1938; D. Rice 1986; P. Rice 1986; P. Rice and D. Rice 2009; Tozzer 1911), the nature of political and economic relationships between the major and minor centers in the region remains less clear. Within this core zone of the southern Maya lowlands, long-term ecological studies have correlated environmental shifts with the growth of Maya civilization, while glyphic studies have identified certain political ties between the regional capitals. Among these Central Petén centers is the site of Motul de San José (Figure 1.1).

Motul de San José was an important political center according to hieroglyphic sources. J. Marcus (1976) was the first to identify its Emblem Glyph1 containing the Ik’ symbol (similar to our letter T) as its main element (often called the Ik’ Emblem Glyph). Recent decipherments have confirmed this identification (Mathews 1985, 1991; Reents-Budet, Bishop, and MacLeod 1994; Schele and Mathews 1998, 187, 203), although Houston and Stuart (personal communication, 1998) have suggested that the Ik’ polity may have encompassed multiple capitals (at the same or at different times), one of which was Motul de San José. During the Late Classic period (AD 600–850), Ik’ rulers or nobles were mentioned either as allies or enemies in the monuments of near and far Maya cities, such as Dos Pilas, Seibal, and Yaxchilán (Houston 1993; Stuart and Houston 1994; Schele and Mathews 1991, 1998). The most important of these references appears on Seibal Stela 10 (dated to AD 849), which records rituals witnessed by the rulers of Tikal or Dos Pilas/Aguateca (which share the same Emblem Glyph), Calakmul, and Motul de San José (Schele and Mathews 1998, 187;
see Tokovinine and Zender, this volume). J. Marcus interprets this text as naming the capitals of four regional states at the end of the Late Classic (1993, 152). In contrast, Schele and Mathews (1998) view this monument as recording period-ending rituals undertaken by the Seibal king Wat’ul Chatel (possibly from the site of Ucanal in Central Petén) and witnessed by the rulers of the other sites, including Motul de San José. The participation of the Motul or Ik’ dynast (called Kan Ek’) together with Tikal/Dos Pilas/Aguateca and Calakmul suggests that it was one of the major actors on the Classic Maya political arena at the end of the Classic period (Schele and Mathews 1998, 185).
Motul de San José was also a center of production of polychrome vessels painted with texts that name the rulers of the Ik’ site, hence called the Ik’ Polychrome Style (see Reents-Budet et al., this volume; Halperin and Foias, this volume). Previous chemical sourcing of some of these elaborate polychrome vases has shown that they were made in the Motul de San José area, although there was enough chemical variation to suggest the existence of multiple workshops in the region (Reents-Budet 1994). There are now a significant number of such vessels in the so-called Ik’ corpus (see Reents-Budet et al., this volume). Although many of these are in private collections, and their provenience is therefore unknown (Kerr 1989–97; Reents-Budet 1994), some are from archaeological contexts, especially from the Petexbatún region (Foias 1996) and now from Motul de San José. The wide distribution of these glyphic vessels, which were given as gifts to cement alliances between the royal elites and nobility of different polities, attests to the extensive political network established by Motul de San José. The close ties with the Petexbatún region, known to be allied with Calakmul during the Late Classic (Martin and Grube 1995, 2000), hint that at some point in its history, Motul was also part of the Calakmul sphere, and therefore in opposition to Tikal, its close neighbor to the north. Building on these earlier studies, our archaeological investigations at Motul offer us a window into its political and economic role in the larger Maya civilization, together with the latest epigraphic decipherments described by Tokovinine and Zender here, as well as the art historical and chemical analyses of the Ik’ polychrome pottery presented in this volume by Reents-Budet and colleagues.

A third reason for the importance of Motul de San José in Maya archaeology is that long-term ecological, archaeological and ethnohistorical projects in the Central Petén Lakes region over the last twenty years have provided us with a rich regional context (D. Rice 1986; P. Rice 1986; Deevey et al. 1979; G. Jones 1989, 1998; D. Rice and P. Rice 1980, 1984, 1990; P. Rice and D. Rice 2009). Detailed research by the Rices, Jones, Deevey, Brenner, and their colleagues have built on early work by George Cowgill (1963), William Bullard (1970, 1973), and Arlen Chase (1983). These investigations have reconstructed the long history of occupation of the lacustrine basins from the Middle Preclassic to the Late Postclassic (P. Rice 1986, 1996, 2004; Sánchez Polo et al. 1995; Cecil and Neff 2006; Pugh 2003, 2005; Rice, Demarest, and Rice 2004; P. Rice and D. Rice 2009), and its impact on the tropical environment of the Central Petén Lakes (Deevey 1978, 1984; Deevey et al. 1979; Deevey, Brenner, and Binford 1983; Anselmetti et al.
The Maya-Colonial Political Geography Project has extended these studies to the Colonial period and expanded both the surveys and excavations to the areas surrounding the largest Lake Petén Itzá (Sanchez Polo et al. 1995; Rice, Rice, and Jones 1993; Rice, Rice, and Pugh 1997; Rice, Sánchez Polo, and Rice 2007; P. Rice and D. Rice 2009). The focus of these projects has been on the Postclassic and Colonial periods. Their extensive surveys of the Central Petén Lakes basin provide a rich base on which the Motul de San José Archaeological Project builds a site-focused intensive analysis of Classic Maya politics and economics.

Models of Maya Economies and Politics

Changing Paradigms

Reconstructions of Maya economies have changed in the last century as interpretations of Classic society have been refined (McAnany 1989, 1993b; Wells 2006; Smith and Schreiber 2005, 2006). According to the earliest theocratic model, this ancient society consisted of two classes: the peaceful priests who concerned themselves with calendrics and astronomy in vacant ceremonial centers, and the peasants or farmers who lived dispersed around the “empty” centers (Thompson 1942, 1966; Becker 1979; Bullard 1960, 1964; Morley and Brainerd 1956). The dispersed peasant population shifted through the countryside following the requirements of extensive slash-and-burn agriculture. As a result of population dispersion and the self-sufficiency imposed by this simple agricultural system, craft specialization and local exchange were underdeveloped. Only long-distance trade, described in ethnohistorical sources from the time of the Spanish Conquest as an important part of the ancient economy (Thompson 1966), was sustained by, and for, the religious elite.

During the 1960s, a second model of Classic Maya society developed in association with a burgeoning interest in the role of environmental factors in sociopolitical change (McAnany 1993b). Influenced by regional highland Mexican projects that emphasized the correlation between regional settlement and environment, a “highland ecological model” was applied to Classic Maya society (Sanders and Price 1968). In the absence of comparable settlement research in eastern Mesoamerica, the environment of the Maya lowlands was described as homogeneous and resource-poor, and as such, it did not require large, centralized economic and political institutions to