



## Ancient Maya Urbanism in the Eastern Lowlands

This book is about the ancient cities of the eastern Maya lowlands—roughly corresponding to the modern nation of Belize—the area between the Caribbean Sea and the Petén region of Guatemala (Figure 1.1). It is not only about how old the cities are and what they looked like; it is also about how the Maya planned the cities and the significance behind that planning.

The eastern lowlands are but a small part of the homeland of the Maya, which extends from western Honduras and El Salvador to eastern Mexico, encompassing all of Guatemala and Belize. This part of the world demonstrates incredible natural diversity, from volcanic highlands in southern Guatemala to karstic lowlands of the Yucatán Peninsula. With a generally hot and humid climate and dense forests, the Maya lowlands are seemingly inhospitable. Yet, in this setting, the ancient Maya developed a rich and unique urban tradition that persisted and evolved for almost 2,000 years. Over a century of archaeological research in the Maya area has identified a complicated array of villages, towns, and cities—complete with causeways, reservoirs, ball courts, pyramids, plazas, and palaces—that are part of this urban tradition.

Although we often talk about the ancient Maya as if their culture was monolithic and homogenous, they had a rich and diverse culture, and Maya cities are each unique. Maya cities share common elements, to be sure, but each is a variation on the theme, shaped by location, available resources, the natural environment, and the thousands of individual decisions made by kings, architects, and builders.

Some of the largest Maya cities are the best known; it was these that drew the early and lingering attention of archaeologists. Scholars have studied places like Tikal, Palenque, Copán, Calakmul, and Chichén Itzá for decades, and the discoveries at those cities have largely shaped our perception of Maya urbanism and culture. However, there are literally thousands of smaller places that have been mapped and studied, and they have much to contribute to our understanding of the Maya.

There are many possible ways to approach the subject of ancient Maya urbanism, but this volume examines what we know about 14 Classic period (250 to 900 CE) Maya cities in Belize, teasing out from published technical reports, journal articles, theses, dissertations, and books information on the site plan, chronology, and political history for each city. The purpose of this study is not simply to present facts about these places; rather, the goal is to examine planning and meaning in eastern lowland urban traditions in the larger context of ancient urban studies. These 14 Maya sites run the gamut from well-known places featured in television shows and documentaries, like the massive city of Caracol, to locales that even few archaeologists have ever visited, like the hard-to-get-to center of Dos Hombres. What the data in this book show are remarkable and nuanced variations in architectural assemblages across space and time, varied levels of political control over suburban landscapes, shared planning concepts combined with wildly different ideas about how to build a Maya city, and intriguing hints at possible relationships between cities based on planning principles.

One thing that makes the study of ancient urbanism intriguing in any part of the world is the underlying fact always lurking in the back of the researcher's mind that, until the first city appeared in a particular part of the world, no one ever lived in a city before. It sounds like a silly statement, but a "city represents a new social order" (Smith 2010:1). Building and living in cities, now the norm, are relatively recent facets of daily life in the history of our species.

The development of cities is, therefore, a fascinating field of study. While not its primary focus, this book touches on that topic by peering into the Preclassic period (1000 BCE to 250 CE) to examine the foundations for Maya cities in Belize at a sample of key sites. These Preclassic places show evidence for important religious, economic, and social structures that made subsequent urban institutions possible. In the Belize Valley archaeologists have uncovered evidence for one of the oldest Maya villages anywhere in the lowlands at Cahal Pech and have documented the significance of the continuity of place and an important transition in ritual architecture at Blackman Eddy. In northern Belize, at Cuello, the mass sacrifice of over 30 people accompanied a similar transformation in community ceremonial architecture, suggesting that sacralized warfare played an important role in the development of social complexity. A few dozen kilometers from there, at Colha, immense deposits of debris from stone tool production provide evidence for craft specialization on an almost industrial scale during the Late and Terminal Preclassic periods (400 BCE to 250 CE). Finally, on the northern coast of Belize along the shore of Corozal Bay, the radical transformation of Cerros from bayside village to ritual center

attests to a new type of political and social order at the end of the Preclassic period as the first divine kings arose in the lowlands.

Cities did not appear overnight in the Maya lowlands. Nor did divine kings, but, as we shall see, Maya cities arose in lockstep with this new form of political and social order. The way the Maya of the Classic period built their cities—the types of buildings they constructed and how they arranged structures and spaces—tells us a lot about the social and political functions of cities and the changing nature of Maya political organization as it grew from its Preclassic roots.

## Kingdoms on the Edge of History

The obvious question of “why the eastern lowlands?” has a three-part, not-so-obvious answer. First, the incredible diversity of the eastern lowlands makes the region a fascinating laboratory in which to study urbanism (Figure 1.2). For example, if you were to pluck a city like Pusilhá from southern Belize and drop it next to La Milpa in northwestern Belize so that you could compare their plans and architecture side by side, you might conclude they were built by two different cultures or were separated in time by hundreds of years. Of course, neither assumption would be correct; they are both Maya cities dating to the same time period, and they are nothing alike.

Second, there are rich data on the cities of the eastern lowlands. As the latter half of this chapter reveals, archaeologists have been investigating Maya sites and landscapes in Belize for over 100 years, and the number of individual research projects has literally exploded since the 1980s. The amount of raw archaeological data that exists for sites in Belize is staggering, yet much of the data are scattered in technical reports, theses, and dissertations. When published in journal articles and book chapters, the data are often presented piecemeal in the service of some specific research question.

Finally, the eastern lowlands represent a significant gap in the more mainstream archaeological literature on Maya cities and culture. In almost every major textbook about the ancient Maya, the eastern lowlands are treated as peripheral to the major cultural developments of the Classic period, despite the wealth of available data. Two things account for this: the cities in the area are generally smaller than their counterparts in the adjacent Petén region, and most lack carved stone monuments with legible texts, although there are important exceptions to this statement.

Although there are some impressive Maya buildings at sites in Belize, and Caracol is one of the largest Maya cities in the lowlands, when archaeolo-

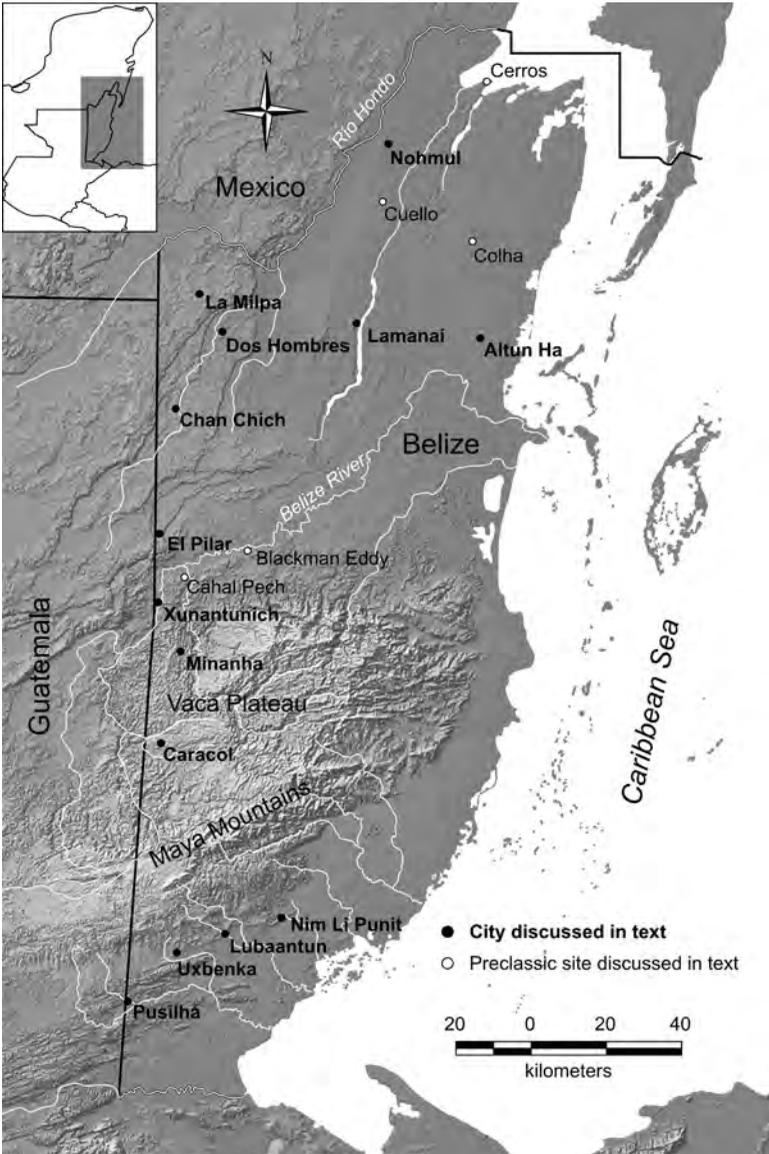


Figure 1.2. Map of the eastern lowlands area showing modern political boundaries and sites discussed in this book. Base map courtesy NASA/JPL-Caltech, SRTM mission.

gists were just beginning to explore the Maya world, it was the large ruins in Guatemala and Mexico that drew the most attention. What archaeologists learned through their excavations at Tikal, in particular, shaped, and continues to influence, our view of many aspects of Maya culture.

Around the time that large-scale projects like the one at Tikal were under way, epigraphers began to decipher Maya hieroglyphs, and sites with well-

preserved stone monuments became even more important in the minds of many researchers. Breakthroughs in decipherment have allowed archaeologists and epigraphers to reconstruct the political history of the Classic period Maya in great detail, not only providing detailed stories of rulers at individual cities but also offering unparalleled information about the relationships between cities. Without a written account, for example, would we ever suspect that the powerful dynasty at Calakmul waged war against Palenque, a city some 245 km away as the quetzal flies (Martin and Grube 2008:159–60)? Maya political history, however, is largely confined temporally to the Classic period and geographically to the southern lowlands, and the narration in most Maya archaeology textbooks is heavily biased in favor of the cities with significant hieroglyphic texts.

Because most Maya cities in the eastern lowlands do not have many monuments with surviving texts, they have been ignored in the discussion of Classic period political history, in which the specific deeds of individual rulers are placed in time and space. Thus, the majority of Maya sites in the eastern lowlands, large and small, exist on the edge of history, full of important data but left out of the intellectual conversation about the historical flow of events. However, the cities of the eastern lowlands participated in the larger cultural developments of the Maya area and have much to offer to our understanding of Maya urbanism; with the proper datasets, it is possible to integrate text-free cities into the discussion of Maya political history.

## History of Maya Archaeology in Belize

Books such as this one build on the work of countless other archaeologists who sweated in the trenches, sorted thousands of pottery sherds in mosquito-netted labs, and painstakingly reconstructed the chronologies and histories of the sites where they worked. Because this book is concerned with the cities of the eastern lowlands, I limit the review of the history of Maya archaeology largely to work conducted in Belize (known as British Honduras until 1973 but referred to throughout this volume as Belize), and I have had to be selective in the projects covered because there is enough material on the history of Belizean archaeology for its own book. Even though the ancient Maya had no concern with the political borders that the nations of Central America would impose on their homeland, those borders have done much to structure the nature of archaeological research since the mid-twentieth century. Different countries have different excavation, conservation, and exportation policies, which combine to shape the nature of archaeological research.