

# I

## Ancient Maya Life on the Fringes of Chetumal Bay

### An Introduction

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Considering how much effort the ancient Maya put into building roads (*sacbeob*) to link communities and facilitate trade (Stanton and Freidel 2005; Tokovinine and Beliaev 2013), they must have considered Chetumal Bay to be a divine superhighway, as they only had to put a canoe in the water to travel an extensive network of riverine and maritime waterways to reach neighboring settlements or journey to the edges of Mayab and beyond (Finnamore 2010:148). Viewed from the dock at ancient Cerro Maya, Chetumal Bay must have loomed large in all aspects of daily life, from food production to commodities procurement and specialty goods acquisition. As canoe traders unloaded new products, ate, drank, and rested for the night, they brought quality news and fresh ideas directly to the dock, bringing purposeful immediacy to the business at hand.

To date, however, no work has appeared that foregrounds the bay as a central theme in a narrative on ancient Maya lifeways. In fact, Chetumal Bay has been considered peripheral to Maya civilization generally, a somewhat poorly understood backwater with little to tell us about the rise and fall of ancient kingdoms. This is due in part to its geography. The bay marks a physical boundary split by an international border that complicates archaeological investigation, compounded by a language barrier between the Spanish and English literatures. The boundary has substantial time depth, stemming from Colonial-era Spanish accounts of untamed borderlands that balked at the *encomienda* model. In addition, the very minimal oversight of English colonial overlords on the southern side left few documents to discover (Guderjan et al. chapter 5).

This volume is meant to remedy that intellectual gap, focusing on recent

work at sites ringing the bay that somehow depended on waterborne trade for a livelihood. In the following chapters, researchers report on how life on the bay influenced their data sets. It is clear the ancient Maya knew that Chetumal Bay was a central place, the nexus of a larger system of waterways that made their livelihoods possible. The authors of this volume make the case that the river system affected all aspects of Maya culture, including settlement, food production, special and exotic goods production and exchange, political relationships, and social organization. Evidence outlined here suggests the Maya living on the fringes of the bay perceived the entire bay as a single resource procurement zone. Waterborne trade brought the world to them, providing them a wider horizon than would have been available to inland cities dependent only on *sacbeob* for news of the world. In truth, the ancient Maya of Chetumal Bay cannot be understood absent the bay as a core element, so we begin with a discussion of its geography.

## Chetumal Bay Geography

As their ancestors did before them, modern lowland Maya peoples inhabit the Yucatán Peninsula, a long, low karst landmass of uplifted Late Tertiary to Holocene sea floors. The peninsula juts northward from the sierras and foothills that comprise the more complex geology of highland Mesoamerica (figure 1.1; also see figure 9.1). The northern portion of Yucatán lacks systematic river drainage; instead, residents and habitats are sustained by a series of limestone sinkholes, or *cenotes*, that dot the landscape, circumscribing habitable space to some degree. In much of the peninsula, minor elevation gradients also produce a series of seasonally inundated wetland watersheds known as *bajos*, as well as more permanent lakes and *aguadas*, that formed an integral part of the agricultural and settlement systems.

Chetumal Bay is a 2,560 km<sup>2</sup> brackish, shallow lagoon situated on the eastern side of the peninsula, roughly halfway between the north coast of Yucatán and the Gulf of Honduras. It is a large bay system that includes an extensive area of sheltered harborage to the north, fed by a wide passage to the south that provides several points of access to the Caribbean Sea (figure 1.2). The northernmost rivers of eastern Yucatán drain into Chetumal Bay along a series of north–south-oriented fault lines (Scarborough 1991:20), creating a hub for waterborne transport between the interior of Petén and Belize and points along the Caribbean coast. From west to east, they drain a landscape of decreasing elevation, so that the rate of flow decreases and saline intrusion increases. The westernmost drainage is the Rio Hondo, which, together with its tributary, the Rio Azul, and its origin in the Alacranes Bajo, forms part of

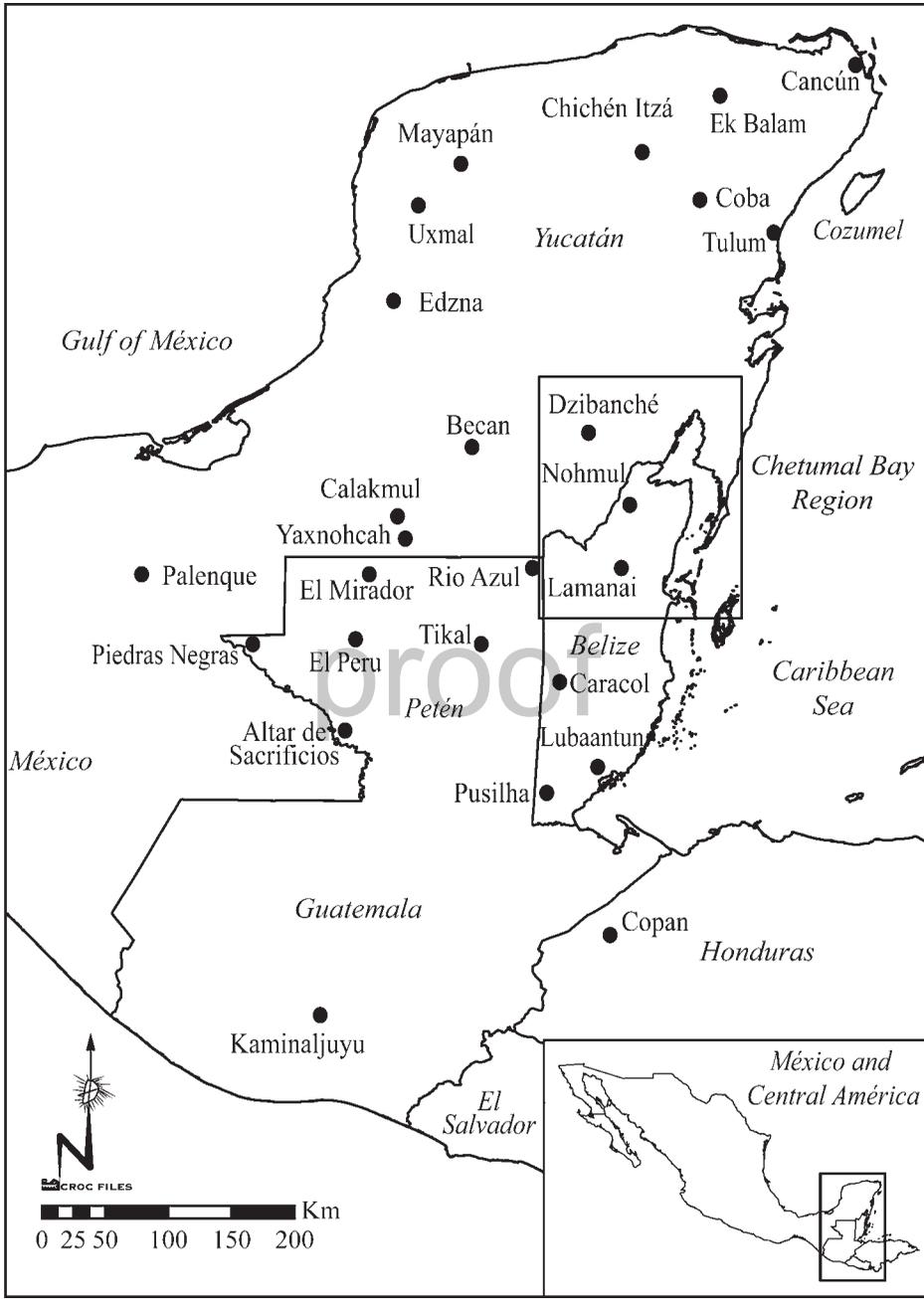


Figure 1.1. Map of the Yucatán Peninsula. (Illustration by Lucas Martindale Johnson and Debra Walker.)

the modern boundary between Mexico and Belize (Guderjan et al. chapter 5). A western tributary, the Rio Escondido, meanders seasonally west to east through southern Quintana Roo, passing the site of Dzibanché before joining the Rio Hondo near its mouth. A few kilometers to the east, the New River parallels the Rio Hondo drainage, providing egress from the expansive New River Lagoon, location of the long-lived Lamanai polity. The New River flows into the bay just south of Corozal Town; hence, this southern arm of the bay is referred to as Corozal Bay.<sup>1</sup> A few kilometers farther east, on the other side of a small peninsula, Freshwater Creek flows into Progresso Lagoon, the location of the island site of Caye Coco, and empties via John Piles Creek into the Laguna Seca near Copperbank Village. Considerably farther east, along the coastal wetlands of Belize's eastern margin, lies Shipstern Lagoon, a low-lying wetland system that parallels the north–south orientation of the other rivers. The modern port of Sarteneja and the eponymous archaeology site is situated on the bay at the north end of the lagoon, while the Classic-era site of Shipstern is located toward the southern end (Sidrys 1983).

To the north of the bay in Quintana Roo, Mexico, the north–south alignment continues, slightly submerged, between the inland Laguna de Bacalar and its system of interconnecting wetlands to the west, and the long, narrow Isla Tamalcab and associated small islets that parallel it in the bay itself (see figure 11.1 for a closer view). North of Tamalcab, two rivers empty the wetland environment, the Rio San Jose to the west and the Rio Kirk at the northernmost point. Protecting the northern arm of Chetumal Bay from the open ocean is the Xcalak Peninsula, comprised mainly of brackish wetland habitats punctuated by white sand beaches on the Caribbean side. These sparsely populated coastal wetlands that protect the interior from sporadic windstorms extend far to the north, encompassing modern nature preserves set on two smaller bays, Espiritu Santo and Ascencion. The southern tip of Xcalak forms the modern Mexico-Belize border at Boca Bacalar Chico, a narrow channel separating it from Ambergris Caye, another north–south-oriented landform that frames the entrance to Chetumal Bay. Technically part of Xcalak, the channel that separates Ambergris Caye from the rest of the peninsula may have been modified by the ancient Maya to facilitate ocean access (Guderjan 1995a:2).

The flat coastal plains and wetlands marking the perimeter of Chetumal Bay have been altered over the centuries for agricultural purposes as well as to improve waterborne transport. Remnant canal features permit us to reconstruct navigable waterways that reached far inland seasonally and, with short portages, once may have spanned the entire peninsula to Laguna de Terminos (Guderjan 1995a:1; Freidel chapter 16). On the northern arm of Chetumal Bay, the Laguna de Bacalar provided the entrance to a series of connected

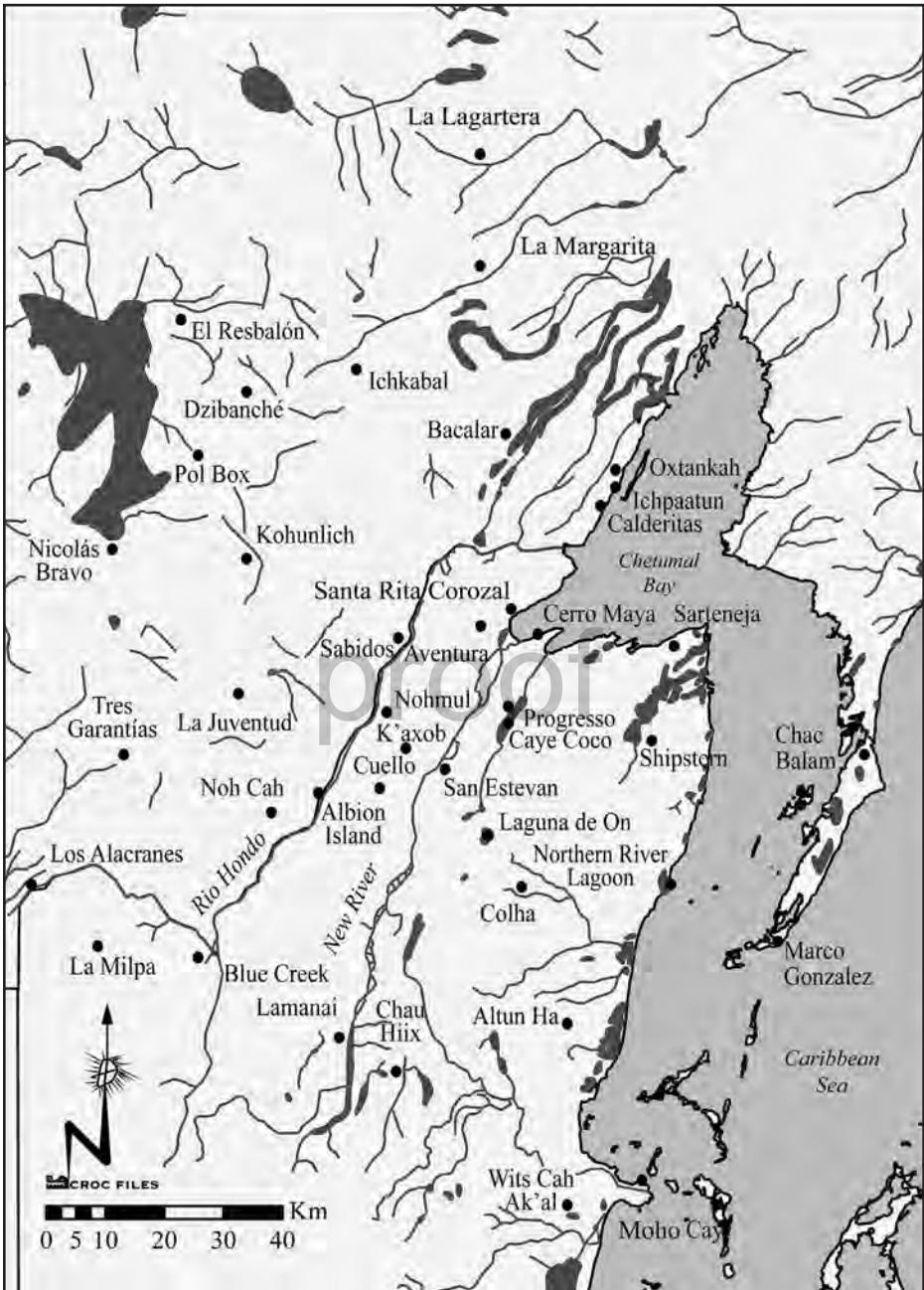


Figure 1.2. Map of the Chetumal Bay watershed. (Illustration by Lucas Martindale Johnson and Debra Walker.)

wetlands and seasonal watersheds to the north and west that extended a substantial distance inland. In sum, the web of navigable waterways that fed into ancient Chetumal Bay offered access and egress to settlements across much of the lower portion of the Yucatán Peninsula. In addition, the Xcalak Peninsula to the north and Ambergris Caye and Belize's extensive barrier reef system to the south facilitated canoe transport on the bay by protecting travelers from the open ocean (Guderjan 2005:183–184).

## Chronology

Chetumal Bay region sites fit within the general chronology already established for the lowland Maya, the major periods being the Archaic, Preclassic, Classic, and Postclassic (table 1.1). The naming system, established long ago, is somewhat arbitrary and confusing, and has its challenges for researchers today; thus, a few words are in order explaining how the terms are used in this volume.

The earliest secure evidence for a human presence in the region predates the use of pottery and is referred to as the Preceramic period in northern Belize (Reese-Taylor chapter 2). It is coeval with the end of the late Archaic (3400–900 BCE),<sup>2</sup> a term used more broadly in Mesoamerica. On the Chetumal Bay drainage, evidence for the early Archaic (8000–3400 BCE) and Paleoindian (before 8000 BCE) eras is poorly known, and includes only a few isolated finds on the upper reaches of the Rio Hondo drainage (Lohse et al. 2006).

The Preclassic, also referred to as the Formative more broadly in Mesoamerica, is defined by the appearance of pottery and sedentism in the archaeological record. For Mesoamerica as a whole, it is generally divided into three segments, Early, Middle, and Late. Based on our current understanding, pottery came later to Chetumal Bay, so that the Preceramic period there overlaps with the Early Preclassic, or Early Formative, in other parts of Mesoamerica, and thus the first evidence for pottery on Chetumal Bay is associated with the Middle Preclassic, dated to 900–300 BCE (Reese-Taylor chapter 2). In the Maya lowlands, the Middle Preclassic has been further divided based on ceramic evidence into early and late facets. Unfortunately, early facet Middle Preclassic is sometimes further divided into early and late facets, again based on ceramic evidence in tandem with radiocarbon dates (Inomata 2011). This produces such terms as “late facet early Middle Preclassic,” which seem ridiculous, as one anonymous reviewer of this manuscript noted. Here we follow the current system for clarity in describing prior work, but recognize the need for better defining this important foundational era in the future.