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IDEOLOGICAL PATHWAYS TO ECONOMIC EXCHANGE: RELIGION, ECONOMY, AND LEGITIMATION AT THE CLASSIC MAYA ROYAL CAPITAL OF CANCUÉN

Arthur A. Demarest

The royal port of Cancuén was a major economic exchange center controlling the nexus of the river and land transport routes between the Maya highlands and lowlands, as well as to the Gulf of Mexico. Given its lack of temples, moderate size, and near absence of direct military activities, it would appear to have been an almost exclusively economic power. However, recent theory has emphasized the seamless connection of ideology and economics. Cancuén provides good examples of the variety of mechanisms of legitimation and control, showing the interactive nature of ideology, ritual, coercion, and economic power. The case of Cancuén is especially illustrative because of the direct nature of its economic resource control and the wide variety of ideological mechanisms used to channel the perceptions and behavior of a broad class of social actors. Furthermore, each mechanism of legitimation appears targeted at a specific aspect of the exchange system. The patterns exemplify the nature of interactions in the Classic period and the devices linking economic rights and ideology.

El puerto de Cancuén era un centro económico, que controlaba el acceso a las rutas terrestres del Altiplano y a las rutas fluviales del río La Pasión. Ambas eran críticas para el transporte y el intercambio entre las Tierras Bajas, el Altiplano, y los estados del Golfo de México. Dado que Cancuén carece de templos, que tiene un tamaño moderado y que hay pocas evidencias de que se haya involucrado directamente en actividades militares, parecería que funcionaba casi exclusivamente como un poder económico. Sin embargo, la teoría recientemente desarrollada ha enfatizado la fluida conexión entre la ideología y la economía. Cancuén provee excelentes ejemplos del uso de una variedad de mecanismos de legitimación y de control, que muestran la naturaleza interactiva de la ideología, el ritual, la coerción y el poder económico. El caso de Cancuén es especialmente ilustrativo por la naturaleza claramente económica que se observa en el control de sus recursos y por una variedad de estrategias que usó para canalizar las percepciones y el comportamiento de una amplia gama de actores sociales. Es más, cada uno de los mecanismos de legitimación que usó parece haber apuntado a un aspecto específico del sistema de intercambio. Los patrones descubiertos ejemplifican la naturaleza de las interacciones en el período Clásico y los dispositivos que ligaban los derechos económicos y la ideología.

Mesoamerican archaeology has begun to contribute greatly to the discourse on the general and specific effects on economy of ideology, symbolism, and ritual—and the material manifestations of those relationships. In this article, I discuss some general theoretical approaches to ideology and economy and some of the specific ideological sources of economic power among the Classic Maya. Then, I examine evidence from the Classic Maya port city of Cancuén as examples of the varied ideological tools used by Maya elites to economic ends.

Some Aspects of the Debate on Precolumbian Ideology and Economy

In recent years, archaeologists have sought to associate the rich evidence on precolumbian religion and ritual with various aspects of ancient economy. No convincing single paradigm for the relationship between ideology and economics has emerged, and none may be necessary. Traditional Marxism would see the concept of “legitimation” of economic relations as the principal function of religion and ideology. Structural Marxism went further to argue

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that religious systems can actually sometimes structure the relations of production (e.g., Godelier 1978). More recently, the model of “ritual economy” has been proposed as applicable to many aspects of the economy (Wells 2006; Wells and McAnany 2012). Both the concepts of “legitimation” and “ritual economy” can yield insights on specific aspects of social practice. The concept of “legitimation” is most useful in cases where religious belief or institutions are created or manipulated to economically privilege elites. As discussed below, “ritual economy” best applies to characterizing ritual events that have identifiable economic or ecological consequences (e.g., Rappaport 1999; Wells 2006).

However, I do not see either of these models as an overarching paradigm for the varied relationships of ideology and economy. It is possible that more case studies, such as those presented here, might inductively help construct a truly useful general approach. “Legitimation” has inevitable connotations of economic primacy and of conscious exploitation by cynical elites. Nonetheless, I use “legitimation” in this article because it seems to be applicable to most ideological mechanisms used at the site of Cancuén in particular—and for that site, even its connotations might be appropriate. With “ritual economy” the problem can be the great breadth to which the concept is actually applied, with ritual seen as the “basic social act” that includes most aspects of both performance and ideology in both “sacred and secular forms” (e.g., Wells and Davis-Salazar 2007; Wells and McAnany 2012). Following Rappaport’s definition (1999:23–24), I believe that the concept of “ritual” is more meaningful if limited to a sequence of particular formal acts (i.e., actual performance) with symbolic and sacred associations. I would use the term “religion” more broadly as covering a polythetic set of particular beliefs, as well as associated practices. “Ideology” is the most general term, referring to *any* aspect of symbolic systems, ritual, religion, or belief, and to associated features of politics or economy (e.g., Flannery and Marcus 1993). All of these terms are useful in specific applications, but only if their meaning is clarified.

Another very broad approach to these issues, one that comes from a different, primarily economic, perspective is that proposed by Hirth (1996) in considering general “principles of political econ-

omy.” With these economic principles, he sought to understand economy rather than ideology. Hirth (1996:221–224) would structure analyses of political economy with four principles: (1) the “accumulation principle” examines the universal feature that economies permit the accumulation of strategic resources, (2) the “context principle” concerns “where and how resource accumulation takes place,” and (3) his “matrix-control principle” examines how elites control resource-accumulation “networks by placing themselves at major matrix positions to influence directly or indirectly the production, accumulation, and flow of resources.” Both the context and matrix control principle apply well in the specific case of the port center of Cancuén—the case study considered here—where elite control of port and exchange contexts were the key to differential accumulation.

Most relevant here is Hirth’s fourth “ideology principle.” Hirth was interested in how the workings of ideology are needed to control critical positions and resources. In Hirth’s structured approach to political economy, a necessary element is “an economic ideology that reinforces both the basis for unequal accumulation of resources and the structure in which it occurs” (Hirth 1996:225). In terms of such principles, “all resource accumulations also are rationalized in terms of end usages that are usually expressed with reference to the population’s general wellbeing” (Hirth 1996:225). This principle reminds us of an obvious fact, sometimes overlooked in thinking on political economy: Power in the economic terms of control of either the means or the relations of production is not a given. It must be accepted by most members of a community that certain individuals or groups have the right of possession or usage of both critical resource contexts and matrix positions. While it could be argued that coercive force was often the means of possession or usage, the control of that coercive policing or military force must itself be accepted and justified by ideological principles. Although not couched in those terms, Hirth’s ideology principle fits well with practice and power theories that see agency at all levels of society, requiring *some* degree of acceptance of inequalities.

In terms of “legitimation,” economic ideology is where elite agency is most easily exerted: “It is in this arena that elites promote the development of new ideologies . . . that provide a basis for them

to shape belief about both the demand for resources and the specific use for which they are collected” (Hirth 1996:226). The utility of Hirth’s paradigm is that it is integrated into a specifically economic model that encourages us to identify aspects of ideology that justify differences in power over critical positions in the economic system. I also doubt that this constitutes a final universal model, but it is one that works very well for the specific system described here, and I believe it does have broad applicability.

Some Ideological Sources of Ancient Maya Elite Economic Power

Following general trends in anthropology, many archaeologists have proposed more central roles for ideology in economic and political power in Mesoamerica (e.g., Clark 2004; DeMarais et al. 1996; Demarest 1992; Flannery and Marcus 1993; Freidel 1981a; Freidel et al. 2002; Helms 1993; Inomata 2001; Schortman et al. 2001). In archaeology of the Maya civilization, such recent trends can be attributed in part to new evidence and intense debate on the very nature of Classic Maya economy—with often conflicting interpretations regarding exchange, markets, and specialization (e.g., Aoyama 2001; Braswell 2010; Chase and Chase 2001, 2004; Dahlin 2009; Demarest 2012; Lucero 2006; Masson and Freidel 2013; Rice 2009; Shaw 2012). Study of connections between Classic Maya ideology and economy are especially promising, given the fine detail we already have on Maya religion and ritual.

Without being in anyway exhaustive, it is worth considering some of the specific ways that religion and ritual were important to Classic Maya elite economic power. Numerous examples have been provided by archaeologists and epigraphers, and some of these have been extrapolated as general characteristics of Maya ideology and economics. Many of these mechanisms were present in Late Classic Cancún.

The most important of these economic rights, although seldom explicitly discussed, was local tithing in products or labor to the royals, nobles, and their courts. Tribute associated with warfare and conquest certainly was an important source of resources, particularly for Maya royal courts (e.g., McAnany 2010:270–304; 2013). Still, in

most Maya states, the major sources for food, goods, and labor were religious in nature. The acceptance of rulers’ right to possess and use such tribute exemplified an economic ideology that had to be maintained.

As McAnany (1998) points out, much of the built environment of the epicenters of Classic Maya sites manifested the ruler’s right to tribute in foodstuffs and labor from the local sustaining populations and vassal zones. Especially prominent were the impressive temple and plaza complexes that dominate Classic Maya epicenters. These served as the setting for grand and expensive ceremonies in which the ruler, *k’uhul ajaw*, was the principal actor. The details of these ceremonies are well known from texts and iconography. Sacred associations that were more accessible to the general non-literate population were created by the placement of these structures with specific directions (e.g., Ashmore and Sabloff 2002) or with sacred features of the natural landscape (e.g., Brady 1997; Demarest et al. 2003). Stucco and stone sculpture provided further symbolic details for this built environment, stages for events that associated rulers with deities, ancestors, cycles of time, and sacred realms. The public ceremonies and their physical settings had effects in terms of social solidarity, internal elite competition, and external status rivalry with other centers. However, from a purely economic perspective, their principal importance was “to justify and legitimize the differential accumulation and use of resources for nondomestic purposes by specific individuals” (Hirth 1996:225).

One model for this right to tribute in labor or goods is that of the “theater state” proposed for southeast Asia by Geertz (e.g., 1980). A diachronic dynamic for this model was added by Tambiah (1977) in terms of unstable “galactic polities” (see also Higham 2001:164–166). Geertz consciously hyperbolized his model to make the point that ideology and ceremony could be a direct source of power, not merely a legitimization of authority that was really based on economic resources or coercion. It was an assertion needing emphasis at that time, given the then-dominance of materialist, ecological, and evolutionary approaches. In a similar vein, I stressed this aspect of Classic Maya polities to underscore the role of ritual and religion as a direct source of ancient Maya material power (Demarest 1992, 2004:206–207, 215–217; Ham-

mond 1991). However, in southeast Asia, there were other sources of power, such as elite direction in warfare, exchange systems, and infrastructure (e.g., Geertz 1980; Higham 2001). Similarly, for the Classic Maya, we have growing detail on elite economic and political power derived from involvement (in widely varying degrees) in field systems, hydraulics, markets, and/or tribute warfare (e.g., Chase and Chase 2001, 2004; Dahlin 2009; Masson and Freidel 2013; McAnany 2010:269–304; Scarborough et al. 2003).

The theater state model is now best understood as a central element of ideology, politics, and economics of almost all Classic Maya states, but not a “type” of state or political organization. This theater state aspect of Classic Maya polities was a central element in the legitimation of other sources of power, including economic control. It provided the economic ideology establishing *in the most general terms* the right of rulers and elites to usage, control, or claims of control over hydraulic systems, the labor of warriors and resulting tribute, products of exotic crafting, and specific contexts of accumulation such as markets, exchange routes, or ports. I would argue that in most cases, but not all, elite control of such critical aspects of the economy may not have been through management but simply through taxation in goods and services. Above all, the ideological power of these grand ceremonies and their epicenter settings were a primary source of the most nearly universal feature of Classic Maya state economies: the “tithing” of food stuffs and labor to physically maintain the holy lords and nobles and their many activities.

Yet even these most central features of economic ideology were highly variable. At some sites, the locations of temple complexes may indicate that rituals were used competitively to justify different sectors’ contested claims to economic and political power (Lucero 2007). At Chunchucmil, there was no central stage for the “theater state” aspect of the economy. Instead, temple/plaza complexes are small and placed within zones (“quadrangles”) separated from other complexes by stone walls (Hutson et al. 2008). As detailed below, most elements of the theater state and its centralized rituals were also absent from the port site of Cancuén—replaced by a variety of more specific ideological contexts and activities claiming various discrete economic rights.

In that regard, even at the more typical lowland centers, the major periodic theater state ceremonies were not the only sources of ideological power or legitimation. A wide range of rituals and symbols associated the rulers with deities, ancestors, sacred places, and natural phenomena. Overlapping with the more general models of legitimation and theater states, these more specific religious associations also justified the central role of rulers and nobles in various contexts of accumulation. Such aspects of economic ideology created sacred elite associations, general and specific, that asserted their rights of control and/or usage of sumptuary goods such as jade, quetzal feathers, spondylus, pyrite, fine textiles, and other exotics that often arrived via long-distance trade, gift exchange, or military tribute.

Elite rights over usage and control of such goods—and sometimes of the production and exchange contexts that brought or produced them—is referred to by McAnany (2010:138–139) as the “naturalized authority of the royal court.” This “naturalization” of economic rights of rulers and nobles involved beliefs associating rulers, and to a lesser extent elites, with maize, water, ancestors, war, sacrifice, and specific deities (McAnany 2013). Rice (2004) has stressed the role of rulers as time lords, with cyclically rotating authority over time itself. Like their other claims of divinity and the theater state rituals, this periodic power could have granted general rights over tribute and labor to the patron lords of specific calendric periods (Rice 2009). Note that in addition to such general claims to labor and goods, the supervision of calendric period ending ceremonies might have provided some degree of control or taxation of the periodic markets that would have coincided with such ritual gatherings (e.g., Freidel 1981b; Rice 2009).

Other general aspects of divine kingship related rulers to the major factors that determine the success of the agricultural cycle. Solar aspects of rulers’ divinity were numerous and included the “*k’inich*” designation in titles of many kings, directly connecting them to the sun god, *k’inich ajaw* (Colas 2003) or to the maize deity (e.g., Houston et al. 2006:45–49). For example, the *Popol Vuh*, many elements of which can be traced to the Classic or even Preclassic, is laden with details relating nobility and divinity to the maize deity and to his sons, the “hero twins,” the protagonists of its

tale. The hero twins also were in part deities of the sun in its diurnal and nocturnal aspects. Of particular relevance to Cancuén, the hero twins were divine practitioners of all forms of sacrifice and of the sacred ballgame. In this, they were models of kingship and nobility for Classic Maya leaders. In the royal version of the ballgame, rulers and high nobles symbolically reenacted the roles of the deities in the myths (e.g., Cohodas 1991). Royal ballcourts (e.g., the one at Cancuén) often had iconography of two rulers or nobles playing a version of the game, such as the “friendly” matches between the twins and between their father and their uncle. Other games central to the *Popol Vuh* were against the death deities. In these, the ballgame and its underworld courts were associated with war and with captive sacrifice (e.g., Miller and Houston 1987). In stone, ceramic, and mural art, ballcourts often were places of presentation or sacrifice of war captives. Thus, ballcourts, and the role of rulers and vassals as players related directly to the claims of royal rights over the labor of warriors and the economic benefits of tribute from vassalage through military victory or alliance. Furthermore, as with the grand periodic theater state events, the attendance at ballgames also had a direct economic impact in providing opportunities for elite gift exchange and general market events that drew on a larger geographical area (e.g., Fash and Fash 2007; Freidel 1981b).

All such rights of court tribute mimicked the general concept of “original debt” to the deities and ancestors that had to be reciprocated with offerings and sacrifice (e.g., McAnany 2010:67–69). The charter of sacred “debt” to the deities (and by analogy to the divine kings) could also apply to the ancestors who were, to various degrees, perceived as supernatural beings, particularly in the case of royal and noble ancestors. Ancestor worship and offerings were central to all aspects of Maya ideology in all periods and at all levels of society (see especially Houston and Inomata 2009:210–216; McAnany 1995, 1998) and had a particular importance at Cancuén and its region (see below). Offerings to ancestors at all levels of society constituted a major investment of goods and labor. Of course, the celebration and propitiation of divine royal dynastic ancestors was the most important and costly of investments, and those events were a part of both the great theater state ceremonies and the

noble burials. Rulers, nobles, and even household patriarchs derived significant power from their role as the most direct interface with the ancestors and the principal actors in many forms of their worship.

It is also especially noteworthy in relation to Cancuén that ancestor ritual and related myths had caves as dominant settings. Most of the episodes in the *Popol Vuh* occurred in either caves or ballcourts or ballcourts within or accessed through caverns. In many zones of the southern lowlands, especially in parts of the southwestern Petén, most offerings of any kind are found in caves. Indeed, there would have been a great economic impact from the production of ceramics and valuable artifacts for cave rituals, given their consequent permanent removal from circulation (Brady 2005). Religion and ritual in the Upper Pasión and Alta Verapaz zones (highlighted here) have always centered on caves, from the Preclassic to the present (e.g., Spenard 2006; Woodfill 2010). Thus, elite roles as directors of some cave rituals further legitimated their general power, as well as their supervision over this specific sacred context of significant economic consumption.

Rulers also had special connection to water, in all of its manifestations. Lucero and others (e.g., Fash 2005; Lucero 2006; Scarborough and Valdez 1998) identify many elements of iconography, texts, and the built environment that may be seen as part of an economic ideology claiming control, or simply credit, for reservoir systems and, of course, timely rains. Note that associations with rivers, water, and sacred fluids are constituents of the ideology of divine kingship in many world regions (e.g., Quigley 2005; Taylor 2013). Symbolic association of the ruler’s body and its fluids were part of the corporal conception of the sacredness of Maya rulers (e.g., Houston et al. 2006; Lucero 2006). These aquatic analogies also could facilitate claims of control over rivers and their benefits, as seen at Cancuén (see below).

With the late eighth-century “balkanization” of Classic Maya royal power, such sacred aquatic connotations of rulership also may have fragmented. During that period, dispersed water features could have been elements of the sacred landscape, providing separate community definition and localized rituals in different sectors of sites (e.g., Fash 2005; Fash and Davis-Salazar 2006), perhaps presided over by resident leaders.

Such a fragmentation of sacred royal claims over aquatic contexts might include division of control and usage of rivers and ports as contexts and “matrix positions” in the exchange economy (e.g., Demarest and Andrieu 2013).

I would argue that in many contexts, we can identify how each of the previously mentioned elements of ritual, religion, and myth also could define *specific* aspects of Classic Maya economic ideology, as attempted here. In more general terms, such beliefs and rituals generated acceptance by the population of elite “ownership, end usage, and resource conversion” (Hirth 1996:225). They rationalized economic ideology “in terms of idealized end usages that are usually expressed with reference to the population’s general wellbeing” (Hirth 1996: 225). Note that such an idealization corresponds closely with the historical and archaeological literature on the nature of divine kingship in general and rulers’ responsibilities for economic prosperity (e.g., Iannone 2013; Quigley 2005; Taylor 2013). As Hirth (1996:225) reminds us, such elements of ideology are not merely an alternative to coercive physical force for resource accumulation. Rather, such an economic ideology is a prerequisite to “legitimize economic inequality *and the use of force to defend* resource accumulations” [emphasis mine]. Ancient Maya elite rights to tribute, labor, and control of specific economic contexts were asserted through this ideology and both general and more focused devices and institutions. These were inscribed in images, architecture, artifacts, and texts.

I present here one set of examples of specific mechanisms of ideological assertion of Classic Maya elite power over critical nodes of the economy. The case of Cancuén is especially illustrative of these, necessarily overlapping, activities because there we see a direct form of elite economic resource control, an importance of exchange systems, and a reliance on a variety of mechanisms used to channel the perceptions and behavior of a broad class of social actors—including peer rulers, elites, local populations, and non-Classic Maya neighbors and more distant trading partners. Furthermore, specific strategies of legitimation at Cancuén seem to be targeted at selected segments of the exchange system. The patterns exemplify our growing awareness of behaviors that link the various “categories” and spheres of action in ancient states.

The Kingdom of Cancuén as a Case Study in Variability in Classic Maya States

Recent research has documented the great degree of variation between Classic Maya cities, particularly in aspects of politics and economy. Indeed, much disagreement between scholars over the nature of Maya states can be attributed to attempts to generalize from individual examples. In some cases, differences in structure reflect scale, with some gigantic centers evidencing a more integrated, heterarchical economic structure. For example, at Caracol specialized communities and under-populated agricultural zones were linked by causeways with market termini (Chase and Chase 2001). While this example has been extrapolated as evidence of general unitary Classic Maya state structure, both such scale and infrastructural features are unusual and can be identified at only a few enormous cities, (e.g., Coba [Folan et al. 1983]). Such a structure might be inferred for other megacenters, such as Calakmul and Tikal. Note that those sites were probably ten to twenty times the size of most Maya centers, and subsistence for both those populations and their elite courts would have been different in structure. A few centers, such as Colhá and Salinas de los Nueve Cerros, appear to be specialized production centers due to access to special resources, and with an elite role in managing these (Hester and Schaffer 1994; Woodfill et al. 2011). But variation is so great that, even within relatively small regions, contrasting hierarchical and heterarchical polities have been identified (Scarborough et al. 2003). Other centers such as Chunchucmil are strikingly different in almost all features, lacking centralized ritual architecture and with an economy based on a port function and well-documented markets (e.g., Dahlin 2009).

Still, I would argue that the vast majority of the courts of Maya centers were probably more dependent on the combination of tithing from religious authority and military vassalage. Nonetheless, taken together, new evidence on Maya economy and more detailed understandings of divine kingship require more studies of “outliers” in variability to identify features of economy and economic ideology that may be present, but less clearly evident, at other sites. We can now assert a high degree of temporal and regional variability in governance and economy, but we are far from understanding

all the factors that determined such variability—and the different ideologies that justified it.

Evidence from the site of Cancuén contributes to the study of variability in Classic Maya states. Like Chunchucmil and Caracol, it does so by having clearly identifiable economic activities linked to an unusual site structure. Put succinctly, Cancuén is a frontier center dedicated to a specific economic function as a port for long-distance exchange. While it is a rich site, with one of the larger palaces in the Classic Maya world, it lacks temples and other features associated with the theater state. At first consideration, royal and elite power appears to have been based on neither religious authority, nor military tribute, but on control of its port economy (e.g., Barrientos and Demarest 2007; Demarest and Andrieu 2013; Demarest et al. 2009). However, following Hirth, an ideology underlying economic control must always be present. After over a decade of investigations, we are beginning to understand aspects of Cancuén's more specifically targeted devices for legitimation of economic control.

As noted above, the term "legitimation" is generally problematic since it carries some of the traditional Marxist connotations of systematic deception by a cynical elite. More often elite agency might be better conceived as operating within a "habitus" generally accepted by the elites themselves but with conscious or unconscious changes created by their own practice within the system. In the case of Cancuén, however, the more manipulative connotations of "legitimation" might not be inappropriate. It was a capital suddenly created in a frontier region and surrounded by communities that did not share many aspects of the Classic lowland Maya religious system. Ideological systems at Cancuén did not gradually evolve, but were rapidly created or adapted for a more diverse audience of lowland and highland, elite and non-elite, sustaining populations and exchange partners. Subjectively, one can suspect that elite and royal agency might have been quite conscious and strategically targeted.

Elite Economic Power at the Port Kingdom of Cancuén

In the late eighth century, Cancuén was the capital of a *kaloomte*, a king of kings. Fourteen large-scale

seasons of excavation have shown that royal state power, and that of the Cancuén nobles, was based on control of significant and obvious economic resources (see the many articles and dozen annual monographs on excavation and lab results in the supplemental online bibliography). The site itself is where the Pasión river begins and connects to adjacent land routes (Figure 1). Sitting in the middle of the Pasión, the Cancuén epicenter peninsula (Figure 2) is the "head of navigation," the point at which the cascades and rapids end and the Pasión first becomes navigable by boat or canoe. It was the transfer point from land to river and vice versa. To the north of Cancuén, the Pasión flows downriver as a smooth highway of transport and exchange, passing many cities of the southern Maya lowlands, intersecting with key land routes, and joining the Usumacinta to lead all the way to the Gulf of Mexico (Barrientos and Demarest 2007; Demarest et al. 2007). To the south, Cancuén links the Pasión river to the archaeologically and ethnohistorically identified land routes to Kaminaljuyú and the Valley of Guatemala, and ultimately to both the Motagua valley and Pacific coast (Figure 2). This valley route is still used today. Also, we have learned in the past decade of the importance of a third route that crosses at the Cancuén nexus: the "transversal" that runs by land due west along the northern base of the highlands of Guatemala, then turning northwest along the foothills of Chiapas, and reaching all the way to the Gulf coast of Tabasco and Veracruz (Figures 1 and 2). This transversal route was a critical one in the final half century of Cancuén's apogee.

Cancuén's position as an economic crossroads of several major routes across southeastern Mesoamerica is quite clear and was reflected in all aspects of its nature and its written history. In all respects, Cancuén was about exchange and about its port economy.

Direct state or noble control of the critical economic assets of the site are indicated by the distribution of elite architecture, imported ceramics, and artifact concentrations (e.g., Demarest 2012; Demarest and Andrieu 2013; Demarest et al. 2009). Within the Cancuén epicenter itself were well-defined ports (Figure 3), three of which have been intensively investigated; these are described in detail elsewhere (e.g., Alvarado 2004; Demarest and Andrieu 2013; and supplemental bibliography).

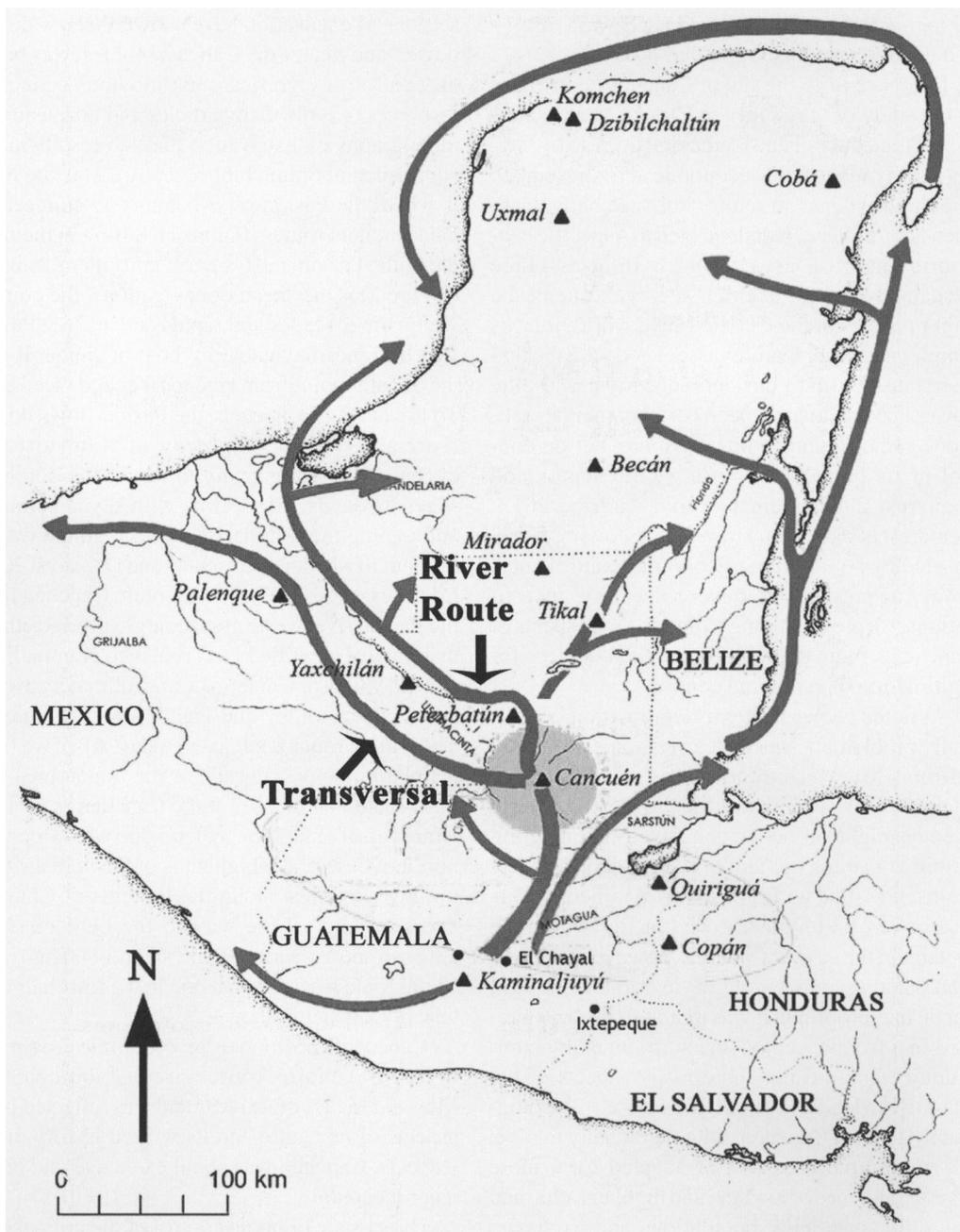


Figure 1. Some major trade routes of southeastern Mesoamerica—showing the strategic zone of Cancuén.

Each of these three investigated ports is in a small inlet off of the river, each has been used as a portage to the present day, and each was surrounded by a complex and varied array of architectural groups (Figure 4). Note that Cancuén differs from a number of Maya ports in that its portages were not

located at a distance but were directly within a site epicenter, as well as being as far from a sea as any major Classic Maya site.

Of particular relevance is the fact that in the two most important “head of navigation” ports (on the northeast and east side of the peninsula) there are

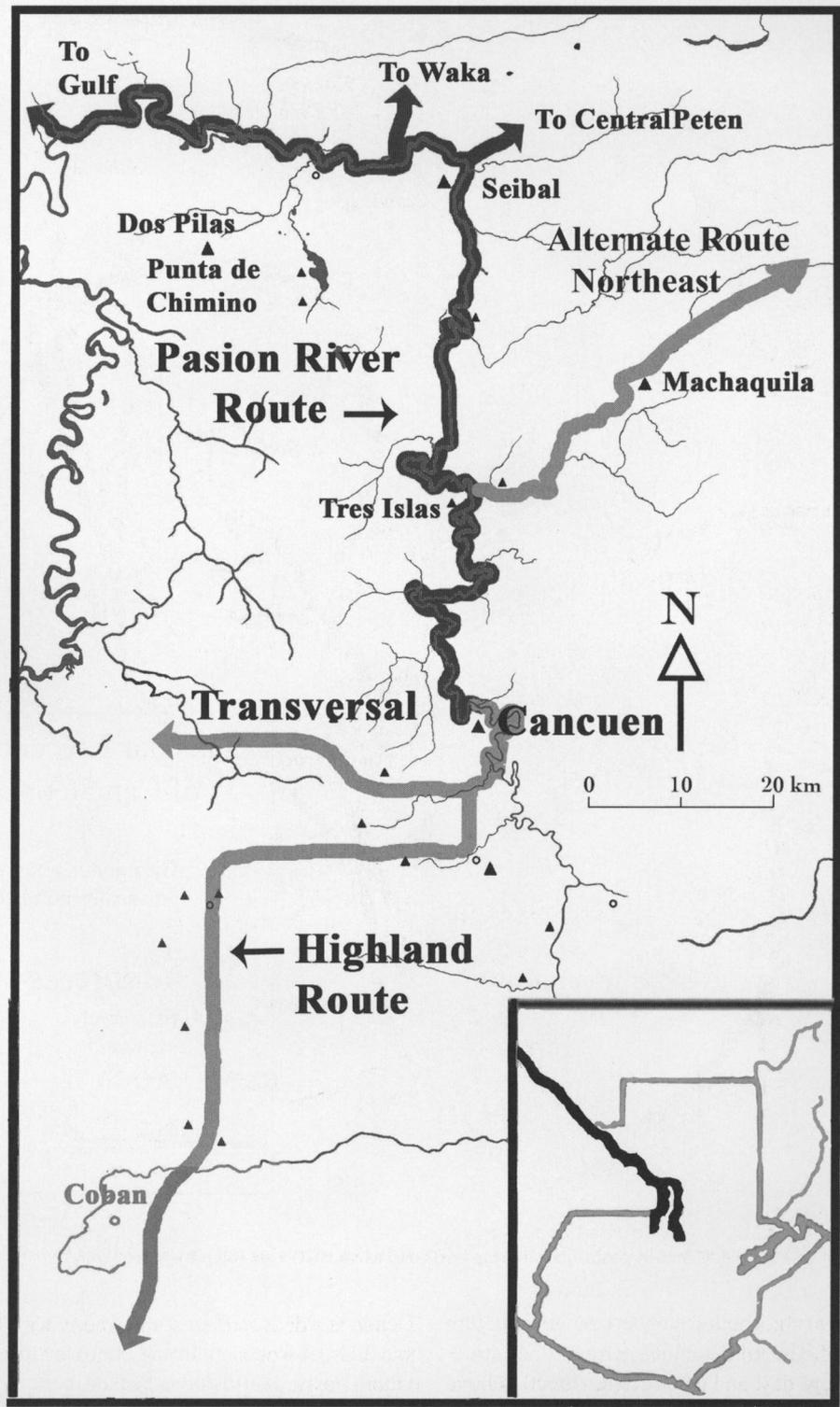


Figure 2. River Pasi3n route (north), highland valley route (south), and “transversal” piedmont route (west) with juncture at Cancuen. Also shown is the “alternative” route northeast via Machaquil3a.

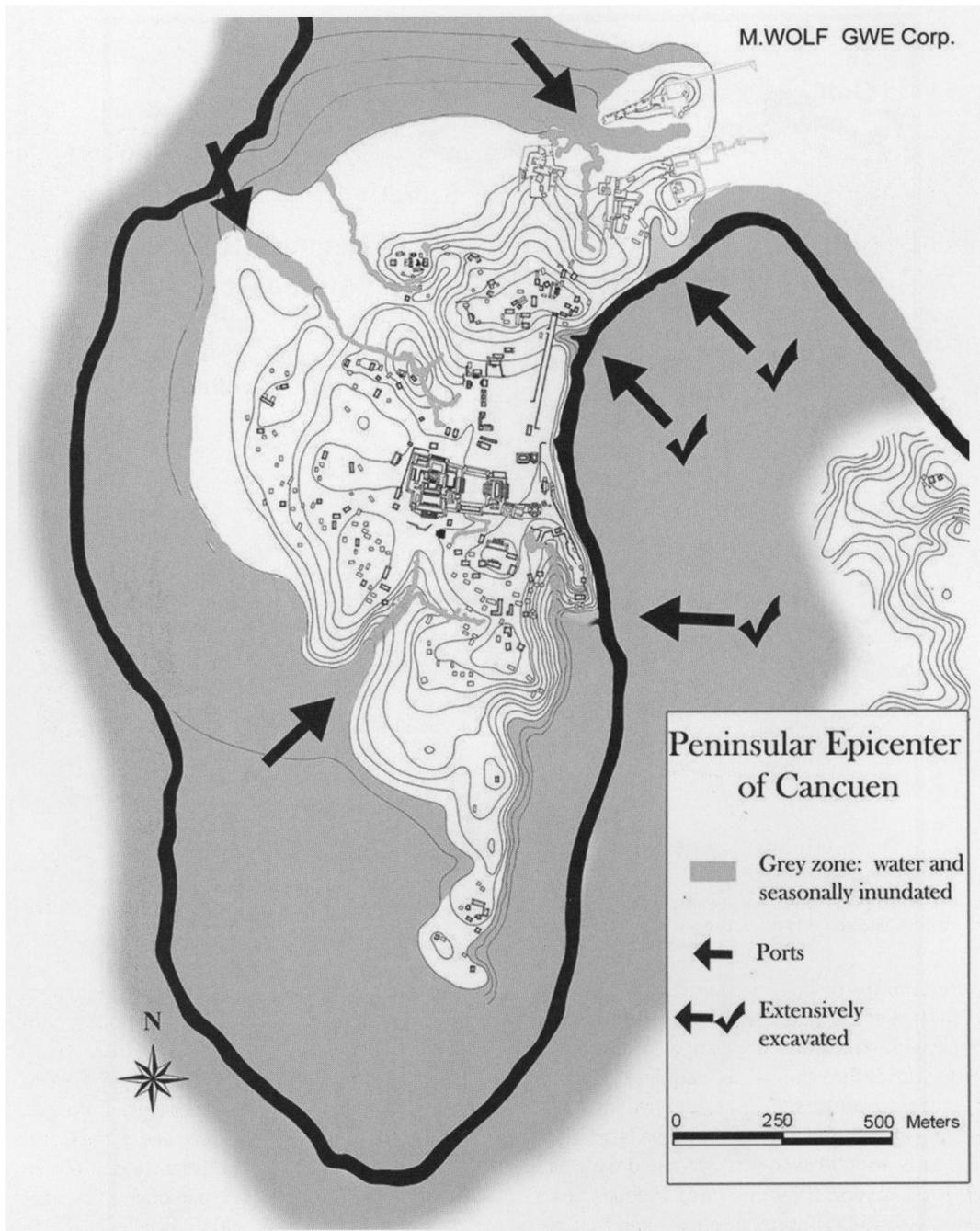


Figure 3. Cancuén peninsula, showing ports and excavated ports (map by Marc Wolf).

fine masonry corbelled vaulted range structure complexes. The third southeastern port has structures all around it and a larger one directly above the port entrance. These complexes are on the north side of each inlet, overlooking the ports from the adjacent escarpments (e.g., Alvarado 2004;

Demarest 2012; Demarest and Andrieu 2013; Jackson 2003). Movement in and out of the three excavated ports would have passed beneath these complexes; and at the northeast port, the other structures, nearer water level, included a variety of what could be broadly called “intermediate range” archi-

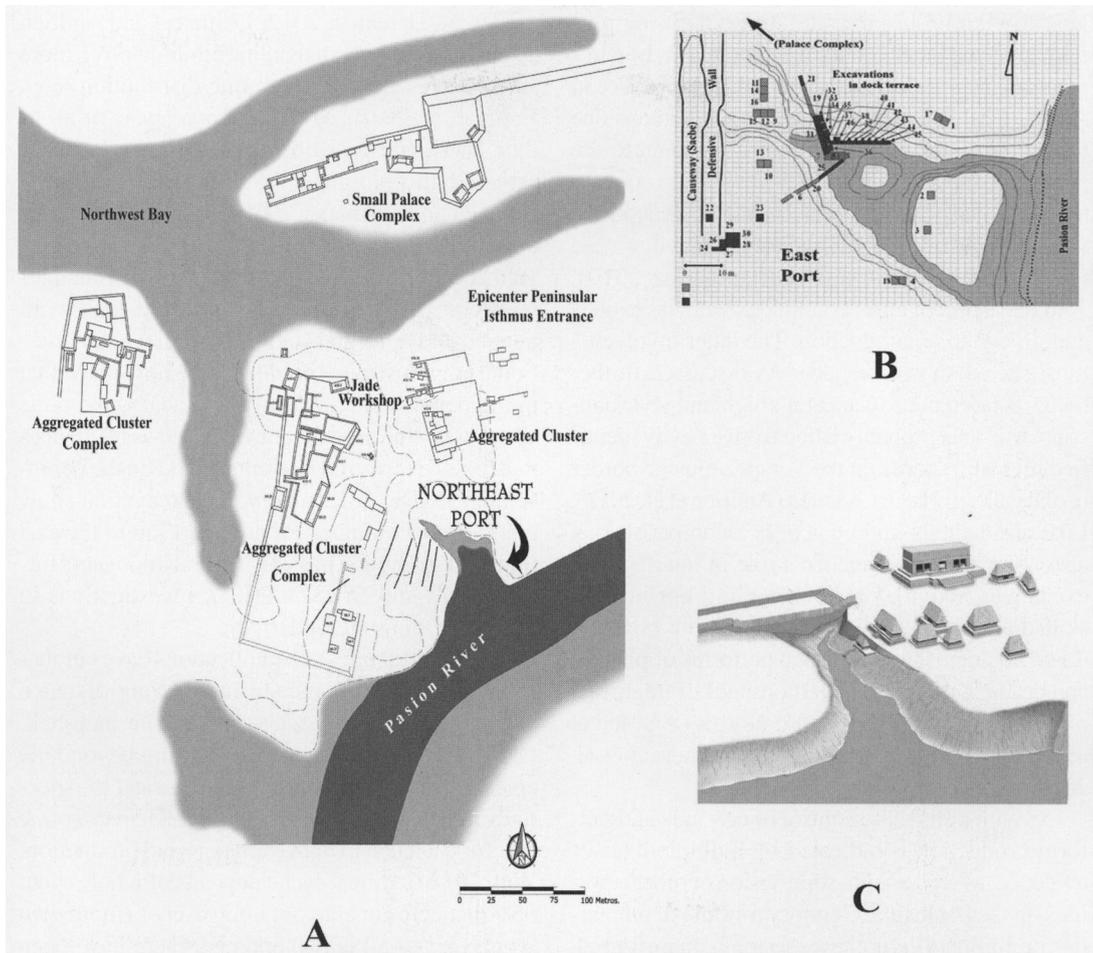


Figure 4. Some ports of Cancuén with elite supervisory structures: (a) northeast port and head of navigation; (b) east port excavations; and (c) reconstruction of east port complex (drawing by Luis F. Luin).

ecture in terms of masonry bases, artifacts, size, and form. On the northern neck of the Cancuén peninsula, a fine masonry range structure sits directly astride the isthmus that leads into the peninsula epicenter of the site and just above the northeastern port complex (Figure 4a). The largest port complex is just 400 m south, associated with Cancuén's eastern port (Figure 4b, 4c). Frequencies of Petén style artifacts at the northeast and east port also indicate Classic lowland affiliations for some of these structures. The elites of these port complexes may have controlled both land and water access to the very head of navigation and, thus, to the Pasión/Usamacinta river system.

Very distinct artifact distributions are associated with different features and sectors of the site, suggesting a complex multi-regional population.

The northern zone of the site's head of navigation, its northeast and east ports, and some other contexts in the site have Chablekal Fine Grey ceramics—sourced compositionally by INAA to Tabasco; significant proportions of black opaque obsidian from Highland Mexico; and some Camamento Fine Orange from Veracruz (e.g., Andrieu and Quiñonez 2010; Bishop, personal communication 2009; Bishop et al. 2005; Forné et al. 2010, 2011). All of these artifacts that related to the site's interregional economy are well-dated ceramically to the Los Laureles and Chaman phases from A.D. 760 to 800, periods identified by texts and architecture as the apogee of the kingdom (Barrientos and Demarest 2007; Fahsen and Barrientos 2006; Fahsen et al. 2003).

Both architecture and artifact distributions sug-

gest lowland Classic elite supervision of port exchange and other economic activities in the site's peninsular epicenter (Demarest 2012; Demarest and Andrieu 2013; Demarest et al. 2009). Perhaps due to control of the loci of arrival of obsidian to the peninsula, most of the obsidian cores were concentrated in royal or high elite cache and burial deposits, whereas core fragments elsewhere are heavily reused (Andrieu 2009; Andrieu and Quiñonez 2010). Another aspect of elite economic power was exotics and, in one case, production. The latter involved a most sacred substance: jade. As discussed further below in reference to Cancuén's highland-style ballcourt, this jade probably came from a newly identified highland source on the Verapaz/Quiche border on the valley route to Cancuén (Andrieu et al. 2011). Like obsidian, its importance, as a non-perishable, also is for plotting Cancuén's role in interregional exchange. Activities at Cancuén did not involve skilled artistry, but rather had to do with breaking down boulders into unfinished preforms of plaques and beads. This process left thousands of fragments of jade debris, boulders, and preforms (Andrieu et al. 2013; Andrieu and Forné 2010; Andrieu et al. 2012; Kovacevich 2006).

As with ports, elite control of raw jade and preform production is indicated by multiple lines of evidence, as well as elite supervision of other activities on the peninsula. Contrary to some of our earlier preliminary hypotheses (e.g., Demarest et al. 2003; Kovacevich 2006, 2007): (1) given the proximity of the workshop to elite complexes (Figure 4a), there was probably minimal autonomy for workshop labor (e.g., Demarest 2012; Demarest and Andrieu 2013); (2) there is only *one* area of production and craftsman residence of any kind thus far identified in the epicenter: the jade preform production in the midst of elite and other complexes; (3) the late imported fine paste wares are not artisan-associated (Kovacevich 2007), but rather have a much wider and more complex distribution, as well as chronological (e.g., Forné et al. 2011) and interregional significance (e.g., Forné et al. 2010). Furthermore, because of landowner restrictions, the area of the site studied prior to 2010 was limited to the peninsular epicenter (see below). Our more recent interpretations, indicating close elite control at Cancuén, are based on extensive 2006–2011 excavations and laboratory study of the many complexes around this port and workshop

area (e.g., Demarest 2012; Demarest and Andrieu 2013; see supplemental online bibliography), more study and evidence on ceramic distribution (e.g., Forné et al. 2010, 2011), and reanalysis of all of the Cancuén jade and obsidian on a lot-by-lot basis, rather than combined by structure types (e.g., Andrieu and Quiñonez 2010; Andrieu, Quiñonez, and Rodas 2011; Andrieu et al. 2012; cf. Kovacevich 2006, 2007). Finally, very significant changes have come in the past two years from field work beyond the epicenter, new lab studies, and additional ethnohistorical evidence. We now know that in the peninsular epicenter were located the ports and much public architecture, as well as residences that together covered all drained land on the peninsula itself. The 2013 survey and excavation show that the site continues for at least 4 km to the east (mapped so far) and possibly several kilometers further (Wolf and Bracken 2013); investigations in other directions are underway.

Many of our previous publications have emphasized the role of Cancuén in the long-distance exchange of exotics, such as jade, pyrite, and shell. Discoveries from Cancuén, extending beyond the epicenter peninsula, and ethnohistorical perspectives from 2013 now suggest a broader economic role for Cancuén in both exchange and production. With 2013 findings, cache deposits of whole spent obsidian cores in elite or public caches (more than 90 percent of all cores) and elsewhere have been recovered: a total of 940 whole spent cores from the A.D. 656 to 800 period of Cancuén's existence—enough cores to produce about 94,000 blades (Andrieu, personal communication 2013). This number of cores already discovered is much more than were recovered for the entire Late Classic of Tikal—a site many times bigger, with a 60-year excavation sample that is literally hundreds of times larger than that of Cancuén (we are still just beginning in “Greater Cancuén”) (Moholy-Nagy 2003:Table 3.18, 3.24, 2008:Table 3.006). However, many of the cores are far from fully spent, also suggesting long-distance exchange of cores. Thus, we now believe that at Cancuén, long-distance exchange of cores was a major aspect of its port economy, but we now also hypothesize that Cancuén was involved in large-scale blade production for the local and regional Upper Pasión and northern Alta Verapaz communities (e.g., Demarest et al. 2013).

Very late in its history (ca. A.D. 780–800), economic functions of Cancuén included jade production, but only of preforms, not finished artifacts. The evidence indicates that, like the ports, the jade preform production area was in the epicenter and was elite-supervised (Demarest 2012; Demarest and Andrieu 2013). As with obsidian cores, exotics, and probably perishables (see below), jade preform production and exchange essentially treated jade as a commodity (e.g., Andrieu et al. 2013; Demarest et al. 2013; on jade as a “commodity” see, e.g., Freidel et al. 2002; Masson and Freidel 2013).

This pattern of elite control of materials and their exchange may not be a general one for Classic Maya sites. Rather, at the central peninsula of Cancuén, it fits well with elite control of access to the ports and the isthmus leading into the epicenter (e.g., Demarest and Andrieu 2013; Demarest et al. 2009; Wolf and Bracken 2013). Elsewhere we speculated that it was actually a developing class of “noble merchant” elites that might have supervised these sites of access and production (Demarest 2012; Demarest and Andrieu 2013; Demarest et al. 2009; see also McAnany 2013). However, a royal claim of control might be inferred from a cache with a large raw jade boulder, polished on one side, found in the throne room of Taj Chan Ahk (e.g., Andrieu et al. 2013). In addition to jade, an elite or state claim of control of obsidian distribution (at least for the limited access epicenter) *might* arguably be inferred from obsidian caches associated with stelae and royal burials.

One hypothesis is that there was elite control in the port of transshipment and distribution (at least peninsula epicenter) of other materials such as pyrite, shell, quetzal plumage, and other perishables. Regarding perishable commodities, it is well documented that in historical times the “transversal” piedmont zone, less than 15 km to the south, was a major zone of intensive production of cacao and cotton. Indeed, the cacao from this piedmont zone was considered to be of unusually prized quality (Caso and Aliphath 2006; van Akkeren 2012:38–39). It also was a production area of the highly valued Maya condiments of vanilla and annatto, which were mixed with the processed cacao in chocolate drinks and with other food stuffs (Caso and Aliphath 2006:36–37, 2012). Also, salt from the piedmont source of Salinas de los Nueve Cerros was most easily accessible via the nearby

Verapaz transversal route leading to Cancuén, where salt-processing metates have been found (Mijangos 2013). These, as well as the more precious sumptuary goods, would have been moved from land to river through the Cancuén ports, and elites certainly would have been in critical “matrix control” positions in terms of Hirth’s principles of the economic system.

Obviously, at Cancuén we see elite control and oversight of many major economic activities. The ports, jade, obsidian, exotics, and other commodity exports would help to explain the impressive elite material culture at this modestly sized site. Again, we cannot extrapolate the evidence at Cancuén for such elite economic control as a general model for all Classic Maya centers. Cancuén’s “frontier” location, its access to, or control of several long-distance exchange routes, the channeling mechanism of its ports, its connections to Gulf coast economies, and the late date of its apogee may all suggest an economy shifting in *some* patterns to a Terminal Classic and Postclassic form of elite-directed mercantilism and commodity exchange (Demarest 2012:364–369; Demarest and Martínez 2010; compare to McAnany 2013). Nonetheless, the study of the international economy of this unusual port center does indicate a direct elite or state role in its economic activities and adds to the growing body of evidence on economic and political variability in the Classic Maya lowlands.

Ideological Mechanics of Power for Cancuén and Its Exchange Network

In all aspects, Cancuén as a port and exchange center would seem to have its identity and power based squarely on economics. It lacked temples, prestigious history, military potential, and a large population. It appears to have been neither a significant military power nor a great ceremonial center. While Cancuén was a major interregional player in the economics of exchange, what economic ideology gave elites “ownership” or “usage” of these resources—of the ports, the head of navigation, the exchange route, the jade workshop? How was that ideology generated and maintained to control these resources and the opportunities for unbalanced accumulation that they provided? The channeling mechanism of the ports and river route gave elites, if not the state, the opportunity to create a classic

example of what Hirth (1996:224) calls a “context oriented” economy: “context oriented systems are those where resources are produced and/or accumulated in special contexts under the direction of organizing or supervising elite.” In turn, this could have facilitated control of the distribution of critical goods within the site, the surrounding region, and via exchange down the river to other lowland centers. However, these advantageous elite economic positions at Cancuén could have existed only with a strong ideology that legitimized ownership or usage.

A look at the details of Cancuén’s ideological structures and devices indicates an astute series of strategies for the feedback cycle between power, ideology, and economics. These included not only power over distribution and transport at the ports, but control (or claims of control) over some imported materials, such as jade boulders, obsidian, pyrite, shell, and probably perishables, as discussed earlier. The instruments of economic ideology at Cancuén were unusually diverse and complex due in part to the multiregional population of its epicenter and sustaining area, requiring tools of legitimation that drew on differing “canons” of belief and ritual.

Religious Pilgrimage, Cave Shrines, and the Early Classic Exchange Route

Turning to specific mechanisms for access to exchange routes, we see a very clear pattern in the Early Classic, before the founding of Cancuén itself as dynastic seat, but within the retrospectively described history of the kingdom (Fahsen and Jackson 2001). Excavations in the Verapaz and along the Upper Pasión valley indicate a more direct Central Petén influence in maintaining Early Classic access and flow on the great western trade route. In the fifth century, sites with Central Petén monuments and ceramics were established in the greater Pasión valley at Punta de Chimino and Tres Islas (Bachand 2010; Barrios 2006). Farther south, all along the piedmont and Verapaz land route (Figure 2), pilgrimage centers in caves had thousands of potsherds of Tzakol-style polychrome ceramics, found in offering deposits in the opening chambers of caverns and even a sculpture with texts in lowland Maya style (Woodfill 2010). Woodfill and Andrieu (2012) have interpreted all of this evidence as indicating

the presence of Central Petén lowland merchants, who also were pilgrims, and who maintained asymmetrical, although non-violent, relations with the Verapaz populations that lined the road to highland goods.

Thus, it would appear that in the Early Classic, the lowland Central Petén control over both the river and land exchange route was through direct presence. The flow of sacred goods, as well as commodities such as salt, obsidian, and cacao, was maintained by such direct contact—with religious pilgrimage to the highland routes as a facilitator of exchange. Such exchange relations were clearly asymmetrical. The Verapaz cave shrines were part of an economic ideology that legitimated such asymmetry.

It is remarkable that in the Late Classic, after the establishment of Cancuén, lowland influence in the Verapaz abruptly ended, and there is little direct evidence of Petén culture in piedmont Verapaz sites or caves. As described below, cave ritual was utilized in the Late Classic by the Cancuén kingdom, but primarily in its immediate sustaining area. It would seem that in the Late Classic there was a radical change in exchange strategy and economic ideology, with Cancuén clearly defined as the intermediary between highland culture and resources and the Maya lowland centers.

The Dynastic Seat of Cancuén: Military Founding and Initial Strategies

The founding of Cancuén in A.D. 656–657 appears to have been purely military strategy. It was founded (or the dynastic seat was moved) by Calakmul, with its epicenter placed on its highly defensible near-island peninsula at the head of navigation of the Pasión river. This move would not have required much force since surrounding communities and piedmont neighbors were few, small, and less complex sites. Under Calakmul’s authority, two of Cancuén’s initial rulers were placed on the throne and apparently held their accessions at Calakmul itself (Fahsen and Jackson 2001; Martin and Grube 2008). Through Cancuén, the Calakmul alliance was able to control the head of navigation, outflanking the Tikal hegemony and seizing control of the Pasión river. These activities were simultaneously coordinated with wars by Calakmul or its allies and conquest of Dos Pilas, Waka, Machaquilá, and other sites on the major western

exchange routes (Demarest 2006:126–166; Martin and Grube 2008).

Cancuén was located adjacent to less complex highland and piedmont communities that did not share lowland material culture or ideology. Thus, it needed a different set of ideological tools to justify economic privileges and power to local populations. As Cancuén gained autonomy with the eighth-century decline of Calakmul, it also utilized various strategies for local control, alliance, and exchange relations with both more distant downriver lowland Petén Maya states to the north and with very different piedmont and highland Maya neighbors and trading partners immediately to the south.

These strategies did not appear to include direct warfare led by Cancuén itself. Monuments do not record military action by the Cancuén *k'uhul ajaw* himself, but by allies (Fahsen and Barrientos 2006). Furthermore, the site lacks temples for the central legitimating force of the theater state. Yet Cancuén needed to control, or ally with, a wide range of different types of polities and communities to form its trade route hegemony. Toward each of these differing entities, Cancuén addressed specific legitimating mechanisms.

Marriage, Alliance, and the Pasión River Exchange Route

Access and exchange on the lowland Pasión river's northern portion of the exchange system involved more familiar tools of Classic Maya alliance. After the A.D. 695 defeat of Calakmul by Tikal and Calakmul's decline, Cancuén became more directly associated with the growing Petexbatun region hegemony of Dos Pilas (Demarest 2006; Martin and Grube 2008:55–67). This association was one of Cancuén's peaceful alliances with the militaristic Dos Pilas state. Cancuén's size and nature would have allowed little opportunity for major conquest, so this alliance was critical to maintain its autonomy and access, specifically to the downriver Pasión exchange system.

At Dos Pilas, a marriage alliance is confirmed in Panel 19, where a queen from Cancuén is portrayed at an important ritual (Demarest 2006:Figure 7.7, p. 142; Houston 1993; Martin and Grube 2008:61). This queen also had her own palace structure group. It is constructed of fine masonry, unlike the mix of rough-worked and unworked stone

found in most Dos Pilas elite architecture. Furthermore, the queen had her own elaborate death throne, naming her a “Lady of Cancuén” (Houston 1993). This alliance with Dos Pilas was continually reinforced by joint rituals such as that recorded on a hieroglyphic staircase in Cancuén's sprawling central palace. It describes ceremonies held at Cancuén by the Dos Pilas ruler, *K'awil Chan K'inich*, with his cousin, the great Cancuén regent, Taj Chan Ahk (Fahsen et al. 2003). Such rituals and marriage alliance guaranteed downriver access on the exchange system, as the predatory Dos Pilas state had conquered the Middle Pasión region (Demarest 2006; Demarest et al. 2007; Houston 1993). Other Cancuén lowland alliances included that with Cancuén's second dynastic seat at Machaquilá, which was subordinate to Cancuén prior to A.D. 800 (Fahsen and Barrientos 2006).

At Cancuén, the physical settings for rituals of downriver alliance with Classic Maya centers included the two lowland Classic Maya-style ballcourts and the smaller courtyards of the palace (described below), which had inscribed monuments and a hieroglyphic staircase with texts for their literate lowland peers. Along with the marriage alliance, these more typical instruments of Classic Maya ideology, and probable gifting of exotics, assured both military immunity and asserted “ownership” of the head of navigation, both critical for Cancuén's economy.

Cancuén Subsistence, Cave Shrines, and “Imagined Community”

Most of the materializations of economic ideology described here assert elite, in some cases state, “ownership” or “usage” of the key features of Cancuén's port and long distance exchange economy. Yet, we must also consider their most direct economic need: the subsistence support to feed and provide labor for the population of the Cancuén epicenter.

The Cancuén peninsula epicenter was packed with the huge royal palace; elite, retainer, and worker residences; ballcourts; and other ideological features (see below). There was little room for agriculture of any kind, except possibly a few small household gardens. Non-elites were more likely primarily retainers for the elite Petén Maya population, as well as workers in many port functions (porters, rowers, boatmen, etc.). This peninsular

core is almost an island, surrounded by the Pasión river, which rises and falls erratically over 8 m per year (and as much as 6 m in one day) due to the heavy rains in the immediately adjacent piedmont and highlands. At times, the river widens around the site to more than 1 km (Figure 3). Beyond are equally unstable river channels, lakes, and swamps, leaving discontinuous areas of drained land useable for occupation or agriculture (e.g., Demarest et al. 2013; Wolf and Bracken 2013). Thus, there is no neatly concentric form for “Greater Cancuén,” but the site continues east from the peninsula, and in other directions is a discontinuous occupation divided by water or swamp. Throughout this area of continuing survey and excavation (see Wolf and Bracken 2013 and supplemental online bibliography), we have recovered Late Classic ceramic assemblages characteristic of Cancuén. These investigations of Cancuén beyond the epicenter have so far mapped and tested 4 km east from the center with continuous significant populations and architecture (e.g., Wolf and Bracken 2013), including several stelae and altar complexes and 123 structures. These include non-elite and elite structures, and the multiregional nature of Cancuén is again reflected in the presence of both Central Petén and piedmont forms. The former include “Plaza Plan 2” groups with a higher shrine structure on the east. Yet they also include what Wolf and Bracken (2013) call “aggregated clusters”—a number of structures of variable style and status densely crammed together on restricted, artificially leveled ground on the limited, well-drained ridges of Cancuén’s swampy environment. This “greater Cancuén” research is continuing now and will for years to come. The current limits of the Cancuén ceramic assemblage are found at the cave shrines 8 to 12 km away (see below).

How was this food and labor support area tied to the Cancuén epicenter? Economic connections to the center might have been based in part on the arrival through Cancuén of goods such as obsidian, cacao, salt, and other piedmont products for distribution via local markets or through community leaders. Identification with the center also could have been created through some of the other ritual and visual devices described below, which could have been experienced at events and visits to Cancuén by community or household leaders. Remember, however, that Cancuén lacked large

temple arenas for theater state rituals for large audiences. Furthermore, during all periods, the religion and ritual of the local transversal, piedmont, and highland populations were very different and were focused on cave and hill shrines.

One ideological strategy of Cancuén appears to have directly utilized local religious canons. Within 8 to 12 km from the Cancuén epicenter, about a 2 to 4 hour walk, and visible from its epicenter, there are many heavily eroded limestone hills, remnants of the piedmont. Many of these scattered hills have caves within them. These “karst towers,” as geologists call them (“mogotes” to local *Q’eqchi’*), have nearly vertical walls, such as those of lowland temples (e.g., Figure 5): “these sites are situated in and around tower-like karst hills with caves, a landscape that represented ‘ready-made temple pyramids’” (Spennard 2006:146–147). Thirteen of these cave/hill shrines have been excavated; all have deposits of artifacts, primarily ceramic offerings dating from the Preclassic to the present (Spennard 2006; Woodfill 2010:76–89). As noted above, Early Classic offerings included basic Petén styles, including lowland Tzakol-style polychromes.

In the Late Classic, however, cave ceramics were the same as those of Cancuén (Spennard 2006:80–116). Spennard (2006) and Woodfill (2010) have interpreted these as shrines used by the local Cancuén population during the Late Classic. The cave excavations at Torre Hun (Figure 5), one of the more impressive hill/cave shrines, recovered evidence of Late Classic rituals, one involved leaving offerings such as a cache containing a human cranium. Spennard interprets that site as a Cancuén ancestor shrine with rituals that might have been like one described in Cancuén Panel 1 (Kistler 2004; Spennard 2006:147–148). In the Late Classic, these cave shrines could have defined a zone of “cave ritual and the establishment of Cancuén authority” (Spennard 2006:147; 142–148; see also Woodfill 2010:76–89). As Spennard (2006:147) concludes: “The rulers of Cancuén ensured that the city incorporated all aspects of the idealized sacred landscape by establishing the San Francisco hills as the pyramid-temples of the site.”

The cave shrines around Cancuén provide an ideological definition of a site-sustaining area, a “Greater Cancuén.” Contemporary archaeological studies no longer define communities as merely areas of contiguous settlement. Instead, they utilize

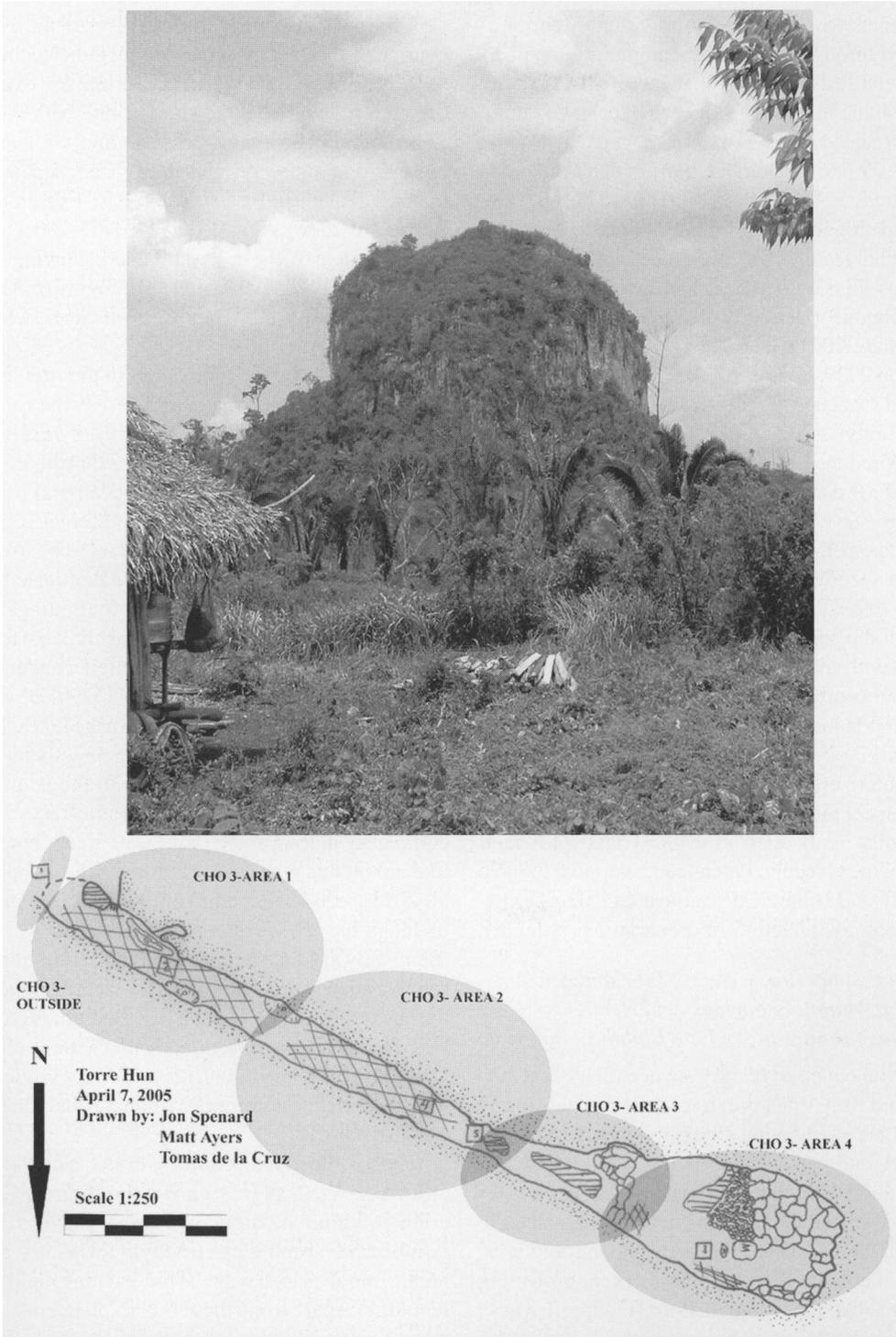


Figure 5. Example of a “Greater Cancuén” hill/cave shrine: the Torre Hun karst tower and excavations of its cave offerings (photo courtesy of Jon Spenard).

the concept of group and individual identity as defined through practice by community members themselves; a definition that more closely corresponds with modern, historic, and ancient communities (e.g., Anderson 1991; Yaeger and Canuto 2000). Zones of membership in such “imagined communities” (Anderson 1991; Isbell 2000) have been identified through specific architectural and artifactual features for contiguous and also discontinuous Classic Maya urban areas at “Greater Chunchumil” (Hutson et al. 2008), Caracol (Chase and Chase 2001), and other sites (e.g., Joyce and Hendon 2000; Yaeger 2000). The cave/hill shrines around Cancuén would have defined its greater community “as a form of identity discourse created and reproduced by interpretive acts in the public sphere” (Preucel 2000:73). Late Classic Cancuén use of the cave shrines also involved the elite agency “to shape beliefs about the demand for resources and the specific use for which they were collected” (Hirth 1996:224)— in this case, for subsistence support for the peninsula epicenter population.

As with the highland-style feasting ballcourt and some other epicenter features, the shrines gave lowland elites settings different from most lowland city states, with rituals that would resonate more effectively with the existing ideology of the local piedmont and highland communities. Suddenly, embedded in a *non*-Classic lowland region, the Cancuén Petén leaders appear to have quickly and strategically adjusted to shape existing ideology (and, thus, its economic privileges).

*The Ballgame, Proxy Wars, “Lowlandized”
Verapaz Mountain Shrines, and New
Exchange Routes in the Late Eighth Century*

The royal ballcourt of the Cancuén rulers Taj Chan Ahk and Kan Maax is extraordinary in its iconography and monuments that provide a narrative of alliance and proxy wars. As discussed below, the association of this ballcourt with the ruler as a water lord was also reflected in its river position and the aquatic themes of its stucco and stone sculptures. The ballcourt had three large markers projecting 15 cm above the ballcourt floor (Figure 6). These were substantial altar-sized monuments (just under 1 m in diameter and 35 cm high). All three altars were found in situ. Their placement and projection up into the playing field would have altered the surface of the court and the nature of the game.

The unusual nature and imagery of the ballcourt, its altars, and its iconography indicate that it served exclusively as a ritual forum for events between rulers. The three altars, along with Panel 3 in the ballcourt range structure and the palace hieroglyphic stairway, tell a tale of Cancuén hegemony, alliance, and proxy wars (e.g., Fahsen and Barrientos 2006). Altar 2, dated to A.D. 790, is the most explicit of these monuments, showing *Taj Chan Ahk* playing with a high lord (Figure 6). They are in elaborate costume, and this was clearly a high ceremonial form of the ballgame.

The competitor or companion in the ritualized and politicized game was identified as the captor of another lord of a center known as *Sac Witz*, “white mountain.” We can speculate that this could have been a reference to a site on the Verapaz transversal, which is only 15 km south of Cancuén. The transversal exchange route runs along the base of this piedmont, and its centers were dominated by very steep white limestone hills—the settings for Verapaz worship. On the transversal, the karst towers were almost mountains, much higher and more impressive than the hill shrines of Cancuén, with great caverns and some large sites. In the Late Classic, the site of Raxruja Viejo, sitting directly on the transversal, was “lowlandized” with the addition of large platforms, terraces, and plain stelae/altar complexes placed at the base of its steep temple-like mountains with caves (Figure 7) (Demarest et al. 2013; see supplemental bibliography). One of its altars has the distinctive truncated cone form found only at Cancuén. Ceramics and stratigraphy suggest a late occupation that could correspond to the late dates on the Cancuén ballcourt altars (A.D. 790–800). Farther west, directly on the transversal at the base of the piedmont, other hill sites suddenly had monuments; and one, La Linterna, had a hieroglyphic staircase.

The late “lowlandization” with stelae platforms at Raxruja Viejo suggests a very brief direct Cancuén lowland influence in the transversal—combining some Petén Maya religious and architectural canons with the pre-existing highland ideology. Apart from these stelae platforms, the sites remained highland in material culture, including coarse-paste ceramics, artifacts, and clay-faced rubble construction style (e.g., Demarest et al. 2013); the ceramics were local in chemical composition, as evaluated by INAA (Ronald Bishop,

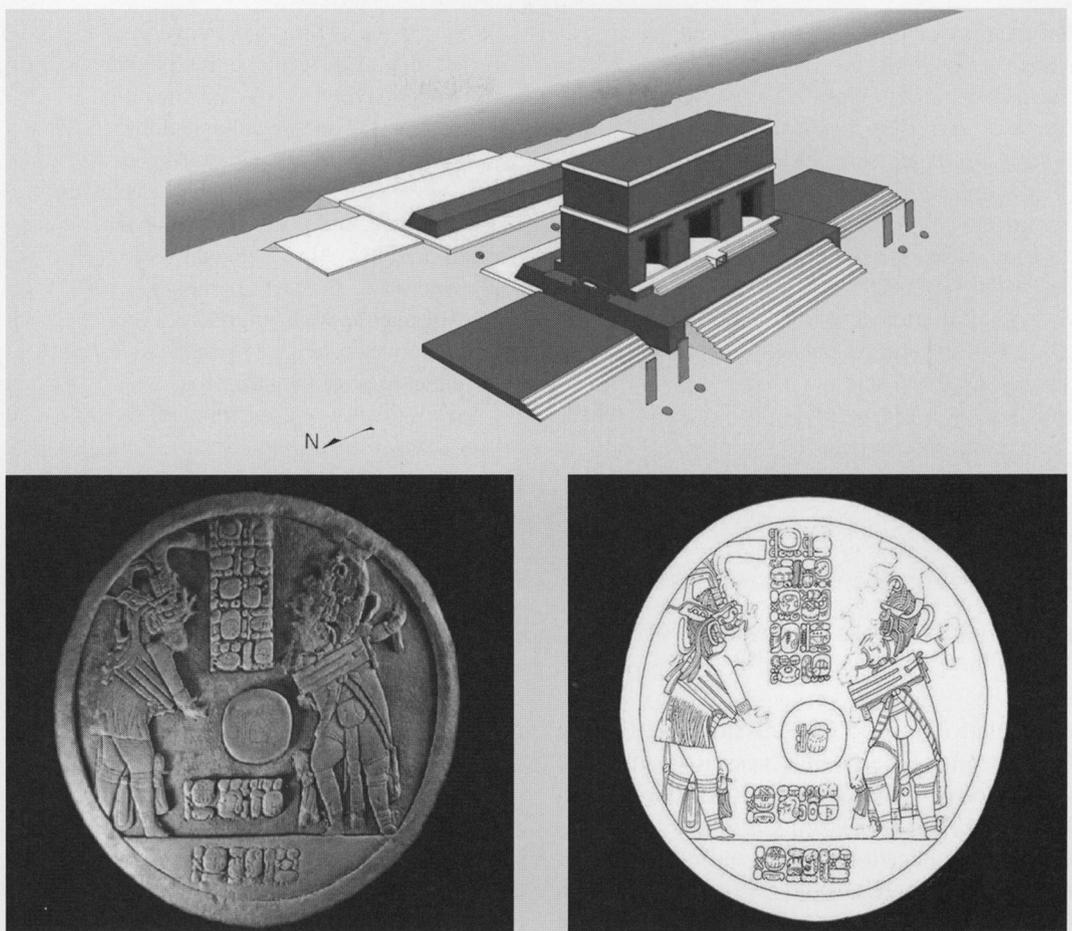


Figure 6. The Royal Ballcourt of *Taj Chan Ahk* and Altar 2, showing the king playing an allied lord celebrating two “proxy wars” for Cancuén (photo by Ken Garrett; drawing by Luis F. Luin).

personal communication 2012). So, lowland Maya migration is not indicated. It also is significant that the “syncretic” lowland religious architecture and influence did *not* penetrate to the south, which shows virtually no Petén ceramics, artifacts, monuments or elements of style of the Late Classic (e.g., Woodfill 2010). The lowland architectural features and monuments are found only directly on the narrow transversal route at the base of those highlands. Once again, a newly created “hybrid” ideology appears to have been used to assure control—or at least, access—to this route west. This economic ideology may have been the mechanism for legitimating “usage or ownership” (Hirth 1996)—in this case, most likely just usage—of these strategic exchange contexts.

The effectiveness of this additional Cancuén ideological strategy is evident at the capital itself.

Compositional evidence suggests that in this period—during the reign of *Taj Chan Ahk* (A.D. 756–796) and his son *Kan Maax* (A.D. 796–80)—there was new access to the transversal route. There was a late eighth-century (A.D. 760–800) influx of materials from far west. These materials would have come most directly via this land route (Figures 1 and 2) from the Gulf of Mexico through the northern Verapaz and Chiapas. The Middle Pasión was racked by warfare, and on that northern river route, the western Tabasco and Veracruz ceramic and lithic imports (described below) were rare or absent during this period. At the same time, some transversal sites were experiencing lowland influences in monuments and architecture (Demarest et al. 2007). Cancuén received significant quantities of eighth-century Chablekal Fine Grey ceramics of high chromium varieties compositionally

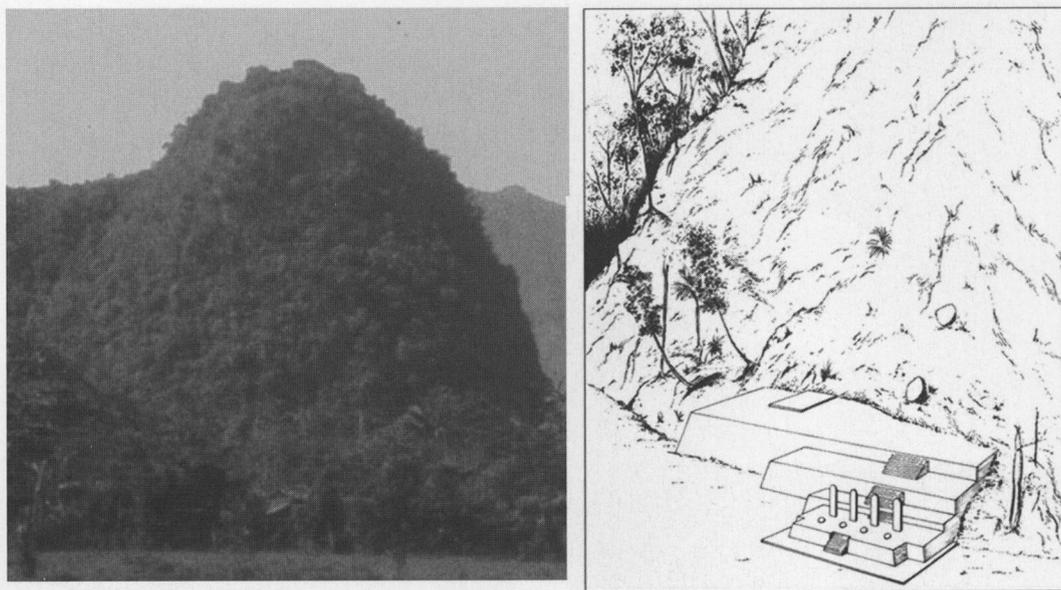


Figure 7. Karst tower and Late Classic “lowlandized” mountain shrine on the transversal at Raxruja Viejo (photo by Matt O’Mansky; drawing by Luis F. Luin).

traceable to Tabasco (Figure 8a), Late Classic Campamento Fine Orange vessels (Figure 8b) from Veracruz (Bishop et al. 2005; Forné et al. 2009, 2010; Ronald Bishop, Christopher Pool personal communications 2011), and black opaque obsidian from Highland Mexico (Andrieu, Quiñonez, and Rodas 2011). This transversal route provided Cancuén with an alternative passage to the west (Figure 2), all the way to the Gulf coast, avoiding the late eighth-century chaos of warfare and destruction in the Middle Pasién region (Demarest 2006; O’Mansky and Dunning 2004). Mechanisms to secure access to this route would have included all of the ritual devices at the Cancuén epicenter, but also may have included the projection of some elements of lowland Classic Maya religious concepts and settings along this new trade transversal route itself.

In terms of ballgame ritual and the routes north into the Petén, we should note that a second inscription was added to the bottom of Altar 2 (Figure 6). This text also credits the king’s companion ball player as being the captor of a lord of the great city of Machaquilá, and texts on many other monuments identify the Cancuén ruler also as “lord of Machaquilá” (e.g., Fahsen and Barrientos 2006; Fahsen et al. 2003). This reestablishment of Cancuén’s control of Machaquilá indicated its contin-

ued dominance of this alternative route to the north, around the maelstrom of the Middle Pasién. This route headed northeast, up the Machaquilá river valley to the central and eastern Petén (Figure 2). In this same late eighth-century period of Cancuén apogee, there is a 50-year hiatus in monuments at the clearly subordinate center of Machaquilá (Fahsen and Barrientos 2006). The alliances supporting the proxy wars and exchange route control were consolidated by the peer polity ballgame and palace rituals described in the monuments and hieroglyphic stairway. It is also probable that such visits by allied rulers included gifting or the exchange of some of the precious resources and general commodities coming through Cancuén’s ports. Furthermore (as discussed above), sacred associations of this type of royal ballcourt, which were part of the general canon of ideological legitimation of the holy lords, generally would have been more empowering to rulers and nobles of every site involved in the exchange system.

The ballcourt of Taj Chan Ahk and, more important, the late eighth-century new “ideological corridor” on the western transversal were only two more of the elements in their strategy of trade route access or control. They were, however, important and unusually explicit strategic projections of political and economic ideology.



A



B

Figure 8. (a) Chablekal Fine Grey (Telchoc composite and Chixculub incised) vessels sourced to Tabasco; (b) Campamento Fine Orange vessel sourced to Veracruz (photos by Andrew Demarest).

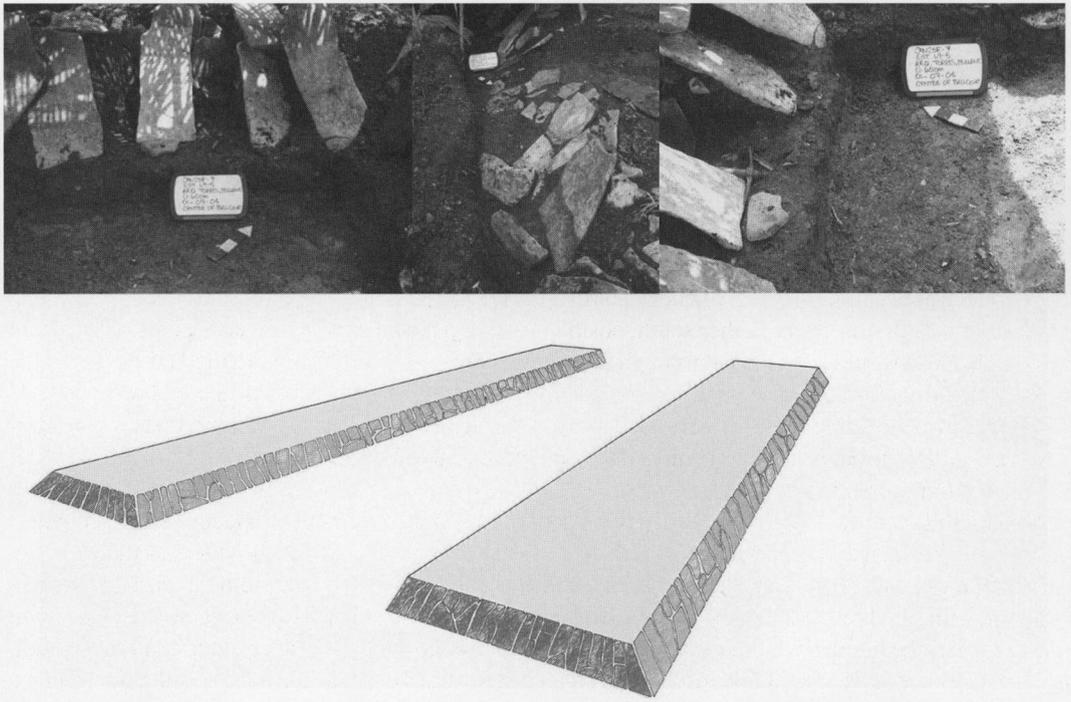


Figure 9. A Cancuén's northern ballcourt with highland Verapaz slab construction style (photos by Paola Torres; drawing by Luis F. Luin).

Long-Distance Highland Resource Exchange and the Cancuén Feasting Ballcourt

The use of a different ideology to support exchange with transversal, piedmont, and highland trading partners is best seen in another ballcourt. This court was located in the very middle of the Cancuén epicenter peninsula. It was a purely highland-style, open, and sprawling ballcourt, 24 m in length (Torres 2011). Unlike *any* court in the lowlands, its playing alley was defined by sloping unworked natural slabs of limestone (Figure 9). This construction technique in ballcourts was completely alien to the Petén and elsewhere at Cancuén, yet it was the most common form of construction in the highland areas to the south. Very similar structures were excavated at Los Encuentros in the Baja Verapaz, Los Cerritos in the Quiché, and Chijolom in the Alta Verapaz (Ichon and Hatch 1982:83–96; Torres 2011:93–97; van Akkeren 2012:70–111). The ballcourt is surrounded by massive, heaped middens of broken serving vessels and jars of local and piedmont ceramics—further evidence that this was a highland-style “feasting ballcourt” (Fox 1996; Torres 2011).

We can posit that the rituals in this context would have created and solidified exchange relationships between the Petén Maya of Cancuén and the highland valley route polities to the south. The area known for such construction style and ballcourts also was the highland source of Cancuén jade. Preliminary chemical compositional analyses have shown that this source was probably located up in the highlands, near the Baja Verapaz/Quiché frontier (Andrieu et al. 2011), not in the well-known Motagua Valley sources and its quarries. Furthermore, analyses of jade production suggest an unusual exchange relationship in the transport of raw jade. Motagua sources and production sites exported jade as manageable preforms (e.g., Rochette 2009). In contrast, the jade arriving at Cancuén from its highland Verapaz/Quiché source was in the completely impractical form of huge, unbroken boulders of 20 to 40 lbs (e.g., Andrieu and Forné 2010; Andrieu et al. 2012, 2013). As the primary activity at Cancuén was breaking boulders into preforms, it was almost a “quarry” workshop—minus only the initial quarry stage: the extraction of blocks from bedrock.

The highland feasting ballcourt may have had a function in a ritualized exchange relationship. That exchange and ballcourt rituals and feasting also would have helped create and legitimize Cancuén elite “ownership” and supervision of jade and its subsequent production into preforms. These ritual exchange relationships would have brought in other exotics, since the highland area where these ballcourts were located also had identified pyrite sources and was near the core zone of quetzal birds, the *biotopo del quetzal*. From farther south, obsidian and shell also would have moved through these same highland valleys. As discussed earlier, new 2012–2013 evidence also suggests that the ballcourt facilitated gifting, tribute, and/or market exchange of Verapaz transversal commodities (cacao, salt, achiote, vanilla, etc.), as well as distribution or exchange of obsidian blades produced at Cancuén (e.g., Demarest et al. 2013; van Akkeren 2012).

Along with rituals and their settings for visiting Verapaz elites, the highland ballgame and its feasting also may have served to solidify ideological and economic alliances (Fox 1996). Its highland-style rituals might have created specific “relations of production,” in a classic sense (Godelier 1978), and, in this specific case, mechanisms of both long-distance and regional material exchange. It has long been recognized that the ballgame had economic as well as ritual and political functions (e.g., Fash and Fash 2007; Scarborough and Wilcox 1991). At Cancuén, such factors were probably involved in all of its ballcourts, but the highland feasting court may have represented a unique context by also facilitating specific long-distance exchange relationships. Thus, it was an instrument of economic ideology—in this case, quite consistent with my own, more narrow, reading of the concept of “ritual economy.”

The Symbolic Water System and Claims of River Control

Another ideological device was an unusual water system at Cancuén. It was one of the most openly visible instruments of legitimation at the site and one which might have directly made claims of control over water, ports, and the river itself.

The water system consists of tiny stone-constructed channels running through the plazas around the enormous royal palace and other elite and public architecture (Figure 10) (Alvarado

2011; Barrientos et al. 2006). Several mound structures appear to have been placed carefully for water diversion into the system (Wolf and Bracken 2013). This system was centrally located in the epicenter. Thus, it would have reinforced the central role of the water lord (Lucero 2006), not geographically segmented power, as characterized by Copan’s water system (Fash 2005; Fash and Davis-Salazar 2006). This miniature constructed stream system was fed by the water sources of several permanent natural springs, as well as the runoff from the finely plastered architecture and plazas of the epicenter. At two points in the elaborate system (Figure 10c, 10d), it had plastered stone masonry pools at springs (Alvarado 2011:63–103, 105–106; Barrientos et al. 2006). Between these pools and the site’s ballcourts and palaces ran the channels faced in stone, 1 to 1.5 m wide and 0.5 to 1.5 m deep. Channels of the system ran past ceremonial architecture, small palaces of nobles, the main entrance to the palace, and, significantly, one channel system began at the palace ballcourt (Figures 10a, 10b).

One fine masonry plaster-sealed pool laid directly at the impressive principal entrance to the royal palace (Figure 10c, 12c). This pool was 8 by 10 m and 2.5 m deep. Its plaster was painted red, further identifying it as a sacred location. Stair steps led down into it (perhaps for ritual ablutions?). This cistern was later the setting of the execution and watery burial, including rich grave goods, of 31 of the site’s nobility (e.g., Suasnavar et al. 2007). Cranial deformation, inlays, rich artifacts, and isotope analyses indicate that these men, women, and children were part of the Petén lowland Maya elite segment of the site population (e.g., Quintanilla 2013; Winburn et al. 2013).

Farther north in the epicenter system, there was another stone cistern of 7.3 by 6 m and more than 3 m deep. It also was finely constructed of masonry and plastered. It had multiple levels, stone channels, and an artificial cascade (Figure 10d). Yet a third conical pool was found in the northwest side of the epicenter. This carefully planned water system was ceremonial, not being necessary for drinking or agricultural water, since the site has several fresh springs within it and is an island surrounded by the Pasión river, with aerated cascades just above its northeast port (Barrientos et al 2006; cf. Fash 2005; Fash and Davis-Salazar 2006).

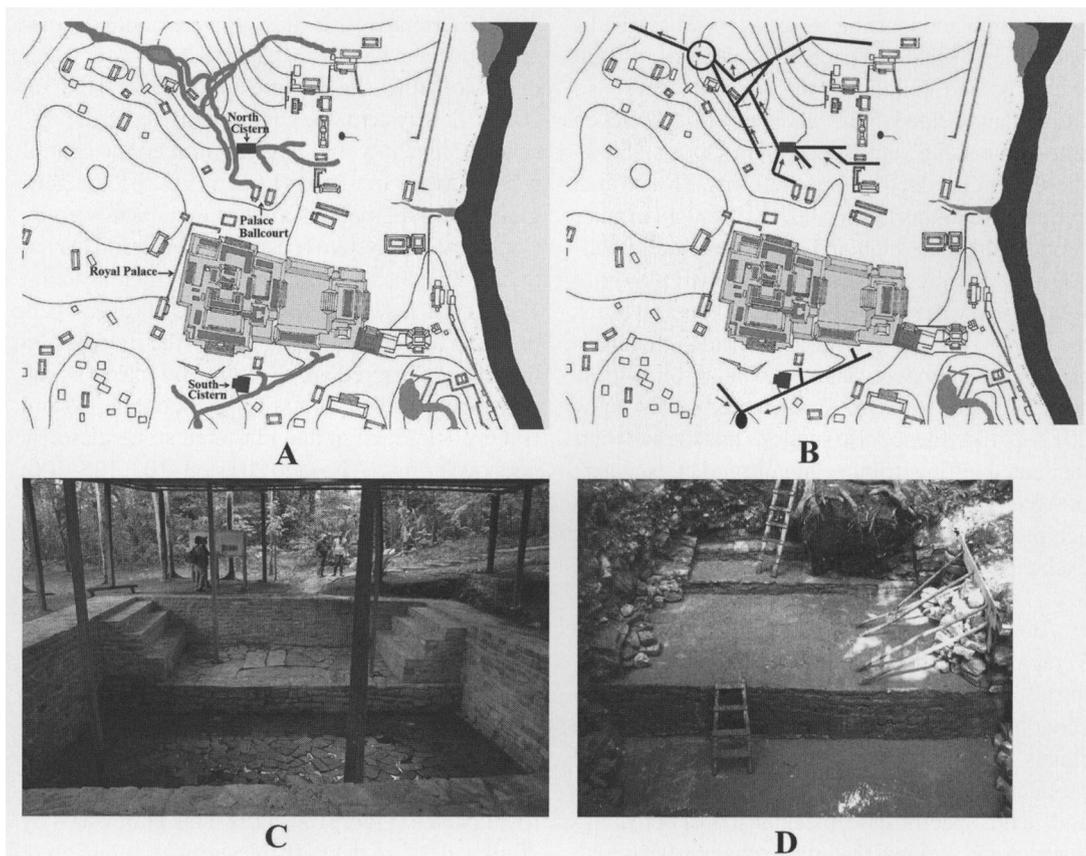


Figure 10. (a) Parts of Cancuén's symbolic water system (channel size enlarged for visibility, actual width, 1 to 1.5 m); (b) elements and water flow in the system; (c) southern cistern pool at the palace entrance; and (d) northern cistern pool (note miniature "cascade") (photos by Luis F. Luin; maps by Tomás Barrientos and Vilma Lorena Demarest).

The location of the system, and the images on the monuments and stuccoes nearby, present the *k'uhul ajaw* as a water lord (Figure 11). Meanwhile, the eastern royal ballcourt of Taj Chan Ahk associated him in its imagery, and its position on the river, as a water lord. Detailed study of the many stucco sculptures of that ballcourt show that the iconography is of water symbols (Fernández 2010). Panel 3 in this same court shows this ruler in a quatrefoil sitting atop a water monster (Barrientos et al. 2006; Fahsen and Barrientos 2006). Together, these features and the miniature river course could have created an ideological legitimation of control of the river and its ports. All of these elements would have been physically visible in the epicenter to all levels of society, residents, and visiting participants at palace meetings, rituals, or the ballcourts.

This water system is an unusually explicit example of the water lord associations of rulers among

the Classic Maya, as discussed by Lucero and others (Fash 2005; Fash and Davis-Salazar 2006; Lucero 2006), and of the more general linkage of rivers, water, and prosperity to divine kings (e.g., Iannone 2013; Quigley 2005). But in this case, images, location, and form suggest that its claims were over the surrounding Pasión river, this port city's all-enveloping source of power.

The Palace as Power-Generating Device

For alliance building at all levels, the royal palace of Cancuén was a well-designed mechanism to inspire awe and to project social distance. It did so through sequential movement between closed architectonic complexes (Barrientos 2013). The palace (Figures 12a and b) covered an area as large as the Central Acropolis of Tikal, despite the fact that the site was only a fraction of Tikal's size. Its eleven courtyards were carefully laid out to be



Figure 11. Panel 3 of Cancuén with water symbols and deities shaded in drawing (photo by Ken Garrett; drawing by Luis. F. Luin).

increasingly more exclusive and ornate as one approached the king and the principal throne room. The western wing of the palace (Figure 12c) has been extensively excavated by Barrientos, Larios, and others, and they have studied its ritual circuit leading to the throne room (e.g., Barrientos 2013; Barrientos et al. 2006; Barrientos and Demarest

2013, see supplemental bibliography). First, to the south, artificial terraces and a stairway went past the beautiful, red-painted, stone cistern—probably a locus of entrance rituals, as discussed above. Then a massive stone stairway led up to the audience chamber rooms (*audiencias*) of Complex L7-9 (Figure 13). The rooms in this particular exterior

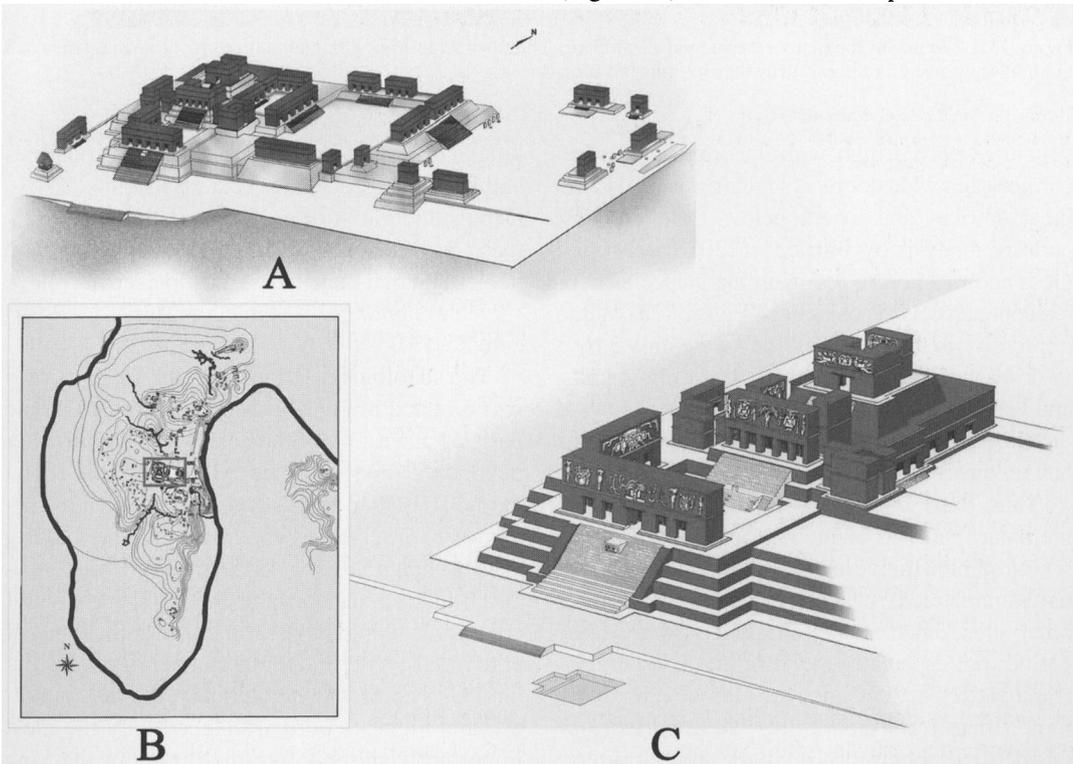


Figure 12. Views of the Cancuén royal palace: (a) overview, (b) position in peninsula and scale, and (c) western entrance (stucco interpretations by Tomás Barrientos; drawings by Luis F. Luin).

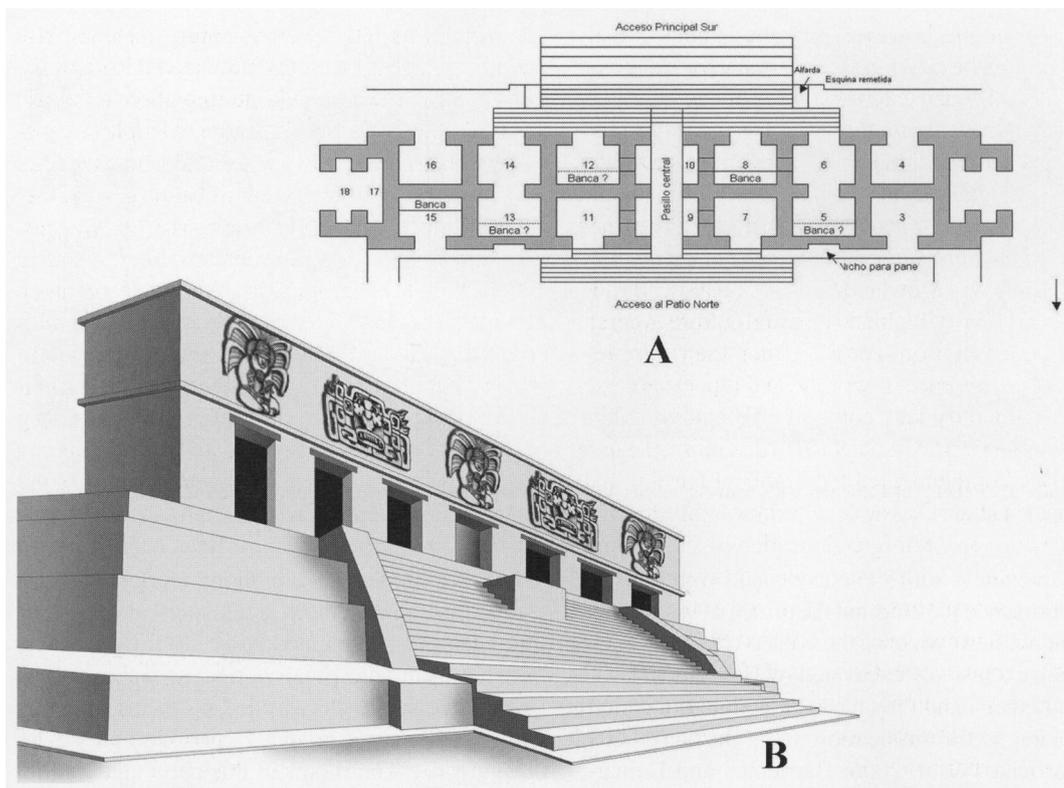


Figure 13. L7-9: one of the many external palace audience chamber structures with giant stucco royal images (rooms, 8 m high; sculptures, 2 m high) (drawings by Luis F. Luin).

structure were 8 m high, with elaborately decorated cornices and wide doorways facing outward to the great stairway and terrace below. Detailed comparative analysis by Barrientos (2013) identified these and most other rooms in the palace as non-residential receiving chambers (Figure 12a). While impressive in their facades, they were only 3 by 3 m or 4 by 4 m in internal area, had only 3 walls, and were open on the side facing outward toward the plazas below (Figure 13). Most of these rooms had no direct access to the palace interior.

Thus, Barrientos (2013) concludes that most of the palace, and all of its outer rooms, may have served administrative and ritual functions. Such ritual/administrative palaces have been identified at other sites, dated to the very end of the Classic period, but especially the Terminal Classic (Barrientos 2013). At Cancuén, almost full-round, larger-than-life-sized figures, adorned *exterior* façades (e.g., Figure 13 b). Studies by Barrientos, Larios, and others conclude that the imagery is of

kings and nobles, some flanked by bas relief deities and profile guard figures (e.g., Barrientos 2013). Details and variation in facial traits suggest that these may have been actual portraits of rulers and nobles and that these parts of the palace may have served as *popol na*, or council houses (e.g., Barrientos 2013).

The ideological strategy of the *inner* palace was directed at lowland peers, like most Classic period palaces. Only the select few would enter beyond the great entrance to the next inner courtyards. These had panels and a stairway with written texts, proclaiming the history of the dynasty and its changing lowland alliances (Fahsen et al. 2003; Fahsen and Jackson 2001). These smaller courtyards would have been ideal for the types of elite ritual events and feasts characteristic of lowland Classic Maya sites. Finally, the last, smallest, and highest courtyard placed only the most important visitors before the throne of the king (Barrientos 2013).

To whom, however, was the general broader impact of the *external* palace architecture directed? Why the myriad exterior audience chambers? Why the massive exterior three-dimensional stuccoes in the palace, royal ballcourt, and adjacent architecture (Figures 12 and 13)? And why the external, openly visible, water system? The answer to these questions must again take into account the fact that Cancuén was a lowland Classic Maya site intruded into a region of highland material culture in ceramics, construction, cave—rather than temple—worship, absence of writing, and other markers of the (generally less complex) Verapaz highland, non-Classic Maya societies. In this sense, the *outer* palace complemented the highland feasting ballcourt and Late Classic cave shrines. While the internal courtyards reinforced the ideological authority and alliance with divine Petén Maya rulers and nobles downriver on the exchange route, external architecture and images would have provided awesome empowerment of Cancuén's elites in a form accessible to neighboring populations and to more distant non-literate, non-Classic Maya, highland exchange partners.

Conclusion

These are some of the mechanisms of ideological action that supported the exertion of authority over economic resources by the elites of Cancuén. They provide specific examples and material correlates for our understandings of “legitimation,” “ritual economy,” and “economic ideology.” In this case, the very rapid trajectory of Cancuén's history was due to a feedback loop: investment in ideological infrastructure and events then provided the labor and resources for further investment in legitimating ritual settings, patronage, and long-distance exchange. The number and unusual nature of its ideological devices accords with the more diverse partners of this frontier center: Classic lowland Maya allies, local piedmont communities, and elites from distant centers ranging from the southern highlands to the Gulf coast. Without either military might or ancient prestige, Cancuén's complex economic ideologies established their rights over ports, the workshop, local support, and long-distance exchange relations. Both the effectiveness and the fragility of this economic ideology can be seen in the very short history of the Cancuén king-

dom, with its late seventh-century meteoric rise and its late eighth-century ritualized destruction.

Ongoing research and interpretation at Classic Maya centers will provide more examples of specific links between ideology, ritual, and economic systems. Admittedly, the identification of such specific connections and institutions is a “moving target,” given changing and contested interpretations of Classic Maya economy itself. On the other hand, the reconstruction of the variable and complex roles of elites in Classic Maya economies can be facilitated by considering the nature and effects of their more richly documented beliefs and rituals. Long considered a “back water” in studies of economy (if not theory in general!), Mayanist archaeology is becoming a leading field in the study of specific connections between religion, ritual, and political economy.

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Supplemental Materials. Supplemental materials are linked to the online version of the paper, which is accessible via the SAA member logon at www.saa.org.

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