



ILLiad TN: 506998

**Journal Title:** Ancient Maya Political Economies

**Call #:** F1435.3.E27 A53 2002

**Volume:**  
**Issue:**  
**Month/Year:** 2002

**Location:** Norlin Library--Stacks  
**AVAILABLE**

**Pages:** Chapter 14, page numbers unkno

**Article Author:** Elizabeth Graham

*pp 396-416*

**Article Title:** Perspectives on Economy and Theory

**PATRON:**

Karen Pierce

**Imprint:**

<p><b><u>For Use of Doc Del Staff</u></b></p> <p>Printed _____ (date)</p> <p>Posted ____ (check mark)</p> <p>Emailed ____ (check mark)</p> <p>Initials _____</p>
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## Chapter Fourteen

### Perspectives on Economy and Theory



Elizabeth Graham

#### Introduction

The centripetal force behind the papers in this volume was originally a tribute to William Rathje in the form of recognition of his contributions to our understanding of ancient Maya economy. In my presented paper (Graham 2000), I concentrated on those aspects of Rathje's perspective without which Maya research would have been much the poorer, and because of which we have been able to move forward to a greater understanding of local and regional economic integration.

This present volume has retained the original economic focus to bring together a range of chapters that provide new information on the changing faces of Maya economy. Rathje's focus went beyond economy, however, to include the role of economic forces in creating and sustaining Maya civilization. If economy figured largely in Rathje's theories, it was secondary to his interest in the explanation of societal change—the motivational force behind his work. Therefore the emphasis in this volume's title on "political" economy accurately reflects Rathje's legacy.

In the chapter that follows, I attempt to cover a range of issues that are critical to our perceptions of the way Maya economy formed, disintegrated, and re-formed through time. These are:

1. the question of explanation in theories of political economy—informing human action, economic integration, and ideology and elite behavior;

2. local and regional exchange;
3. the idea that resource diversity is in the eye of the beholder;
4. economic prosperity; and
5. the role of elites and their demands.

In the process, I will bring recent information from the excavations at Lamanai as well as excavation data from coastal sites to bear on questions of economic integration.

## **Explanation in Theories of Political Economy**

Rathje's contributions (1972, 1975, 1983, chapter 2 this volume; Rathje et al. 1978) to our understanding of Maya economy are exceptional, in my view, in two major ways. The first is that they include the kind of explanation that can inform human action; and the second is that they attempt to explain Maya civilization in terms that require us to be knowledgeable about mechanisms of integration. Integration is given detailed attention in other explanatory paradigms, such as Flannery's cultural evolution of civilizations (1972); but Flannery's is a theory-for-all-seasons, whereas Rathje is well aware that mechanisms of integration have a momentum and a direction all their own, which he usually doesn't hesitate to define (chapter 2 this volume). In addition, Flannery's evolutionary paradigm, although it takes human action into account, is not designed to explain it.

### ***Informing Human Action***

My reference above to informing human action is a main criterion of mine in assessing the value of a theory, although I recognize that such a criterion is not universally significant for other scholars. For me, theory is inseparable from why I practice archaeology in the first place—because I believe we can learn from archaeology, and apply what we learn to solve contemporary socioeconomic problems. Therefore the key question I ask is, By what process do I learn from this theory?

There are theories that shed light on why things happen, but the clarity afforded can be gained only in hindsight, or exists on an analytical level that is irrelevant to individual action. For this kind of theory, understanding cannot be applied to individual decision-making. Much of evolutionary theory is like this (Dawkins 1976), as is systems theory (e.g., Flannery 1972). In terms of evolution,

knowing that genes are selfish (Dawkins 1976) doesn't inform any decisions that I might make about the course of my life. It is interesting knowledge, and could be critical information in some deity's long-term planning, but it exists on a field that isn't relevant to me as a player. Therefore I cannot *learn* from it because learning involves modification of behavior, and knowing my genes are selfish doesn't provide me with particularly useful information about why I might choose to buy Farberware as opposed to Cuisinart. Nor will theories like it help me learn why, in Terminal Classic times at Lamanai and in contrast to the Petexbatun region (Foias, chapter 8 this volume), serving ware continued to be a hot item. The form and decoration of serving ware changed, but not the preference for vessels that were used to display food. This phenomenon reflects people's choices as well as responses to demands. To understand political economy, what we need are theories that help us evaluate the context of these choices.

In this volume, the contextual focus is political economy, and I will proceed to discuss aspects of political economy in more detail. I feel it important to begin at the level of explanation, because the subtext of every chapter in the volume includes choices the author or authors have already made about explanation and the purpose it serves. Although the focus on Rathje's work is not as explicitly highlighted in the volume as it was in the SAA session, I believe that it is the attention originally given by the authors to relating their data and conclusions about economy to some part of Rathje's work that makes the chapters work so well together. That is, we have agreed, in some cases explicitly and in others only implicitly, on the kinds of explanation that work, and the chapters address issues of political economy that work within this explanatory range.

### ***Economic Mechanisms of Integration***

It was Hanson's chapter (chapter 13) that made me aware of Rathje's work for its emphasis on integrative mechanisms. Hanson describes Rathje's core-buffer model as an explanation for the origin and historical development of Maya political economy. He sees Rathje's core-buffer framework as akin to a *world-systems* model in that it was developed to explain dependent economic development, with the surplus value of transactions accruing to the core. Hanson goes on to say that world-systems theory, and by implication the core-buffer zone model, is in effect a theory of historical change. Why should a theory of historical change appeal to archaeologists?

Be-cause theories of historical change are explanatory in ways that have implications for understanding human action.

Hanson elucidates another level of Rathje's work, which is also well developed by Dahlin and Ardren (chapter 9 this volume). This has to do with the frameworks for investigating households and household economy; specifically, the microstructure and macrostructure of households. Mayanists have, according to Hanson, devoted attention to households and their place within the community, but households have otherwise been neglected as institutions of critical importance in a world-systems or core-periphery frame. Some scholarly writing, in fact, still gives the impression that the household economy is indeed separate from economies operating at regional levels. But, as Hanson points out, Rathje recognized the household as *integral* to the structure of the larger economy, and thus tacitly recognized the interconnectedness of all aspects of Maya political economy.

Hanson, Dahlin and Ardren, and Braswell (chapters 13, 9, and 10, respectively, this volume) build on Rathje's work by amassing a wide range of detailed archaeological data on household and community internal patterning—based on architecture, traffic flow patterns, extra-household features, and, of course, artifacts. They then increase our understanding of the possible range of explanations for these patterns by providing coherent macrostructural models as frameworks of integration. In all three instances, the premises of the respective cases are laid out to facilitate testing of their hypotheses. This is critical in archaeological thought, in order that debates can move from what people might think are good or bad ideas to testing what is proposed.

### ***Integration, Ideology, and Elite Behavior***

Other contributions to this volume, such as that of Sullivan (chapter 7), Freidel et al. (chapter 3), and to some extent McAnany et al. (chapter 5), build on the integrative aspects of Rathje's theories by reference to elite behavior, and in particular elite exclusionary behavior, ideology, or cosmology. Both the core-buffer framework and Rathje's nouveau elite hypothesis (chapter 2 this volume) include integration at the level of ideology. Sullivan and McAnany et al. see economic and ideological factors as closely intertwined, and they present evidence—stronger in Sullivan's case because of the stage of

the work—for exchange among elites being linked to shared ideologies and thereby the maintenance of elite ties. Sullivan sees ceramics in the Early Classic, and architecture in the Late Classic, as emblematic of elite power. McAnany et al. suggest that we consider cacao as an item of exchange among the elite, from which it follows that the growing of cacao is essentially a response to elite demands. Although McAnany et al.'s claims at this stage will be difficult to test, the ways in which elite activities and elite demands affected farmers and their priorities of production are critical to understanding the dynamics of Maya economy. Freidel et al. argue, in a different but closely related vein, that Maya political economy incorporated not only goods that had use-value, but goods that derived their value as much from their ideological or cosmological significance, such as jade or *Spondylus*. Prestige goods and elite control will be discussed in more detail below.

The implications of elite activities bring us directly back to Rathje's ideas (chapter 2) about the existence of a nouveau elite among the Maya. As with his earlier work on origins and development, the attractiveness of this hypothesis lies in the way it envisions—and stimulates thought about—the ideological and cultural factors that structure the character of social production. Rathje's argument about a growing hierarchy, and the early investment of elites in Monstrous Visual Symbols (with reference to Fletcher 1977) makes intuitive sense. Lamanai, certainly, can be said to represent this pattern (Pendergast 1981). The Late Preclassic construction of the 33m-high N10-43 is never again matched, and the acropolis-like platform affectionately known by us as Holiday House, which supports a dozen or so buildings the latest of which are Early Classic, is another example of early investment in monumental architecture with what appears to us to be a wasteful use of resources. The nouveau elite idea is additionally attractive to me at another level: It is an idea that attempts to explain the origins of Maya civilization by linking important changes in social state to the ways in which humans make decisions—in this case about the exercise of power—and therefore bears on our understanding of the use and abuse of power in a range of circumstances, both ancient and modern. I will examine the issue of elite power relations below, but will now turn to the ways in which economic integration is envisioned, and to tools of terminology that still need sharpening (Graham 1987: 761).

## Local Exchange

Masson states in the introduction to this volume that "understanding local resources is critical for evaluating the value of commodities produced within subregions of the Maya area." She goes on to refer to McGuire (1989), who states that the more unevenly resources are distributed, the more likely communities will be dependent on others for items critical to their basic maintenance. I understand these observations to mean that local resources are important at the subregional level, both for their potential as basic subsistence items and for their potential commercial advantage (i.e., in exchange). I concur, but I have also argued strongly elsewhere (Graham 1987) that local resources and local exchange are critical in understanding interregional exchange, and even exchange over long distances (1987: 763). Most of the papers in this volume, in fact, prove the point that locally situating the resources and exchange patterns of the site one is investigating is the building block to understanding regional or long-distance exchange.

### ***Can the Local Be Universal?***

Despite my emphasis on the local, it is methodologically unsound to assume that there is a range of items that are universally "local" in the lowlands, such as chert, limestone, pottery, or forest products and game. What is local should in each case be established, not assumed. Masson's research (chapter 12 this volume) in northern Belize at the sites of Laguna de On and Caye Coco is doing exactly this: by carefully reconstructing local economies through analyses of all artifact categories, and by building knowledge of the locally available resources. Dahlin and Ardren's research, too, (chapter 9) includes a heavy emphasis on resource mapping. Masson has been able to reconstruct the details of community and intercommunity relationships and thus, with knowledge of what her communities have to offer through time, can assess the full implications of longer-distance relationships, and the layers of Postclassic political economy in particular.

What we should not do, however, is assume that there is a set of items that is local to Maya communities in the lowlands in general and attempt to build on this assumption. We cannot know what is exotic ("from another part of the world; foreign" [Soukhanov 1992]) until we know what is local, and as Mayanists we may even need to know more about the varieties of Maya subsistence patterns before

we can be certain about what constitutes local subsistence items. For example, until about the fifth century, coastal Maya communities may have relied more heavily on root crops than on maize (Graham 1994: 269, 316). Salt is certainly not exotic to communities along the coast and for some distance inland, particularly in southern Belize where the river valleys run east-west, and in northern Belize where the rivers flow into Corozal Bay. Obsidian, too, was easier to acquire in areas of southern Belize than chert, which was not found locally owing to the absence of limestone deposits (Graham 1994: 9–18). Calabashes, probably widely used as household containers, grow in Belize in the “pine ridge” zones (savannas), and would be exotic to communities surrounded by broadleaf forests. Forest products and game, however, are exotic to many coastal and caye communities, as well as to those that occupied Belize’s atolls, whereas *Spondylus americanus* and conch are local to communities that occupied the cayes and coast.

Although it is fruitful to develop the *concept* of local vs. nonlocal resources at a general level, it would be a mistake to assume that specific products or items will always fit the local or nonlocal bill. In fact, this would defeat our entire purpose, which is to sort out what people develop easy access to, and what they find hard to get but still worth getting.

As an example, I point to my work in the Stann Creek District in the 1970s (Graham 1994). Nothing I had done up to that time prepared me for the landscape in which I was to spend a good part of the next three years: virtually no limestone; highly acidic soils; slates, granites, and sandstones used as building material; white clay used as “plaster”; and plant communities I had not seen before. But I know all this now in hindsight; I did not know it then, and I approached the original excavations as I would have excavated in northern Belize. What were the most ubiquitous materials? No artifacts were found in great numbers, not even ceramics, but there were materials that were common to all sites in the district: chert, quartz, obsidian, granite, and slate. If I had gone into the area assuming in advance that chert was local and granite was nonlocal, I would have been in big trouble. Worse, what if no one had studied the area, but Mayanists continued to assume that chert is a local resource everywhere, and then reconstructed trade routes on this basis? They would have been completely off-base with regard to a good portion of the coast and hinterlands of southern Belize, which certainly figured, if not in the rise of civilization in the Petén, at least as locales of major transshipment points in both coastal and inland trade.

Chert is not found locally in this region because there is virtually no limestone (Graham 1994). It and obsidian had to be imported, and indications are that the supplies did not come from northern Belize, but from elsewhere (H. Shafer, personal communication 1976). Granite is accessible locally, although it depends on the location of the community. Those people living near river mouths either would have had to travel upriver to areas where granite boulders spill outward from deposits located in the foothills, or would have had to obtain the granite products from communities closer to the foothills. Recent work being carried out by Marc Abramiuk in *Maya Mountains* communities on local exchange of ground stone items suggests that it was probably the latter. There is a granite outcrop along the North Stann Creek River; any community based here would have been able to access the raw material more easily than those at the mouth of the river. As for obsidian, it occurred more commonly than chert; the small sample from the district included only 102 chert pieces vs. 282 obsidian pieces, although a small sample of chert from the 1973 season was lost (Graham 1994: 263–271). Because most of the communities in the district had easy access to the sea, it seems likely that obsidian reached them through coastal trade. Even with the lost chert sample, though, obsidian artifacts outnumber chert. Quartz chips (probably used in graters for root crops) and slate were found at all sites. Approximately 226 pieces were collected as possible artifacts, and 84 turned out to show use-wear (Graham 1994: 269). Quartz is found locally in almost all stream beds, but its use is difficult to detect without microscopic analysis. Slate is more restricted in distribution than quartz, although outcrops exist in the foothills and in at least one area, near a place called Alta Vista, along the North Stann Creek River.

At Lamanai, chert, obsidian, and granite artifacts occur (but no quartz chips), and slate is rare and occurs mainly in the form of mirror backs in caches. Lamanai is situated in an area dominated by limestone geology, so we assume that there are chert sources nearby; Chau Hiix (Pyburn 1998) is the nearest known source, and at least some chert at Lamanai comes from Colha (H. Shafer, personal communication to D. Pendergast, 1984). Obsidian distribution has not yet been studied, but obsidian sources lie far from Lamanai in comparison to the Stann Creek District sites. Obsidian nonetheless occurs in large amounts in Classic period caches, and in household deposits from Preclassic through Postclassic times. Granite sources lie distant from Lamanai, but are not as far away as the sources of obsidian in

volcanic regions, whereas granite occurs in the metamorphic highlands of Belize (Wright et al. 1959). Granite manos and metates occur throughout the site's history in household and midden deposits. The proportion of granite to limestone ground stone artifacts has not been measured, but granite artifacts are not uncommon.

### ***The Many Faces of "The Region"***

The term *region* may seem at first to be far less problematic than the term *local*, but it, too, needs sharp definition, depending on the circumstances (Graham 1987: 761–762). Does it have primarily an environmental connotation in which zones of resource production are distinguished from zones of resource distribution? Does it encompass an area of production and distribution of a particular item of exchange, such as pottery, where a varied range of resources is found within a delimited area? Or does it distinguish a political territory defined on the basis of archaeological and epigraphic evidence (Graham 1987: 761)? West (chapter 6 this volume) has recognized the subtleties of these distinctions and is careful to point out that the distribution of the four ceramic paste groups in and around Palenque corresponds with the distribution of Palenque's emblem glyph, and this suggests congruence of Palenque's political and economic spheres. Reese-Taylor and Walker (chapter 4 this volume) define northern Belize as a geographic region, but the environmental features may define an area of cultural integration. Sullivan (chapter 7 this volume) considers northwestern Belize as a region by describing the geographic features that define it, but states explicitly that political integration is not implied. The eastern river valleys of the Caribbean watershed (McAnany et al., chapter 5 this volume) can be seen as a region with regard to soil characteristics and agricultural potential, at the same time that inferences can also be drawn, based on architecture, about political status (Graham 1994: 13, 335–344; McAnany et al. this volume). The Petexbatun region (Foias, chapter 8 this volume) we know from other publications to be primarily a political entity (Houston 1993). Chunchucmil (Dahlin and Ardren, chapter 9 this volume) is unusual in that it is defined as the center of an economic region, whereas San Martín Jilotepeque (Braswell, chapter 10 this volume) and Andrews and Mock's region (chapter 11 this volume) have the even rarer honor of being defined in relationship to a specific regional resource: obsidian and salt, respectively. This attention now given to regional definition and analysis signals

significant progress since the time I originally criticized Maya archaeology for its dull-edged terminological tools (Graham 1987: 761).

Some questionable conflation is still inherent in our usage nonetheless. The highlands and lowlands of Rathje's original model (1972) are basically environmentally conceived, whereas *core*, *periphery*, and *buffer* are terms that carry particular political and economic implications. The ease with which such broad environmental distinctions conflate with and feed into relationships of political economy should still be regarded by us with some suspicion. The highlands became politically peripheral more or less by the power of the pen, and the lowlands environment conveniently produced a division we already recognized on other terms. Seems too good to be true?

In any case, what is important is that the environmental terms we use, such as highlands and lowlands, among others, as well as the dichotomies we set up, such as local vs. nonlocal or exotic, are tools of analysis. As applied, they help us—outsiders in both space and time—as a kind of short-cut to figuring out what products or items might be found in a particular area (in the case of environmental terms), or to imagining how important it was and indeed whether it was even possible for people to obtain particular goods (subsistence vs. prestige), or how much effort might have been involved in getting the goods (local vs. nonlocal, regional, etc.). But we should be careful not to assume too much in advance.

### **Resource Diversity Is in the Eye of the Beholder**

As alluded to above, the lowlands were at one time characterized as homogeneous in terms of resources, but that view subsequently changed (Graham 1987), and lowland environmental diversity now seems generally accepted (Masson, chapter 1 this volume). On the other hand, although resource diversity *can* act as a stimulus to exchange, there is a myriad of other factors that are equally important, so that resource diversity alone should not stand as the *raison d'être* for exchange. Both what constitutes a *resource* and the creation of a demand or need (concept of diversity) can reflect cultural characteristics, individual perceptions, and indeed local history. Generally, residents will see their home locale for its diversity rather than its sameness because they know it so well.

People living at Lamanai for their entire lives could have had no concept of a *highlands* being more diverse in resources if they had

never been to a community we archaeologists characterize as being “in the highlands.” And even then, people travel to communities to exchange goods or to make use of services or to visit relatives and friends. Except for some cases in modern tourism, people generally do not travel explicitly or solely for the purpose of visiting another environmental region. At the level of archaeological analysis, perceptions change based on familiarity. Many Mesoamericanists were born outside both the highlands and the lowlands of the Maya area. The less familiar we are with an area, the more we pick out only the obvious differences, and we categorize accordingly—usually simplistically (perhaps the source of the original perception of the lowlands as homogeneous).

### ***Subsistence Goods: Are They Only Local?***

Given that a single metate or mano could have lasted for several generations, and could have served an extended family, its frequency in deposits must be measured differently from that of chert or obsidian tools, for example, which broke readily and therefore had a different use and discard rate through time. This information, in addition to what I have discussed above concerning the Stann Creek sites, should caution us against saying that “few nonlocal subsistence goods have been found in the archaeological record of the Classic Maya lowlands” (West, chapter 6 this volume). Assuming that subsistence goods are those that most Maya families considered essential to the running of a household, and given the ubiquitous presence of chert and obsidian in household deposits, if in different proportions in different areas, then certainly chert destined for use as tools, and possibly obsidian destined for tool use, too, could be considered subsistence goods at Lamanai. I would also include granite in this category, because, based on preliminary data, households through time seem to have made efforts to obtain granite manos and metates in addition to their limestone inventory.

In Stann Creek, given the occurrence of chert, quartz, obsidian, and slate at all sites, and during all time periods, all these materials can be considered subsistence resources. Chert and obsidian in this case are *not* local. Quartz is local, but if it was a subsistence good to Stann Creek residents, who may have grown more root crops than elsewhere in the lowlands, it was not considered useful enough anywhere else to import. The same can be said of slate, which was commonly used as a tool for a variety of purposes in the Stann Creek

District, and at Tipu, along the Macal River—we found pieces that were ground down, notched, perforated, or with marks from being tied round with string—many forms of modification. In these cases it was clearly an abundant local resource (slate can be found along the upper reaches of the Macal River) that could serve a variety of purposes, including game boards (in Stann Creek) in the Postclassic, but it was not valued enough to export *except* when it was made into backs for mirrors. Here its contextual recovery in burials and caches at sites such as Lamanai suggests that it could also have served as a component, at least, of what has come to be called a prestige item.

To summarize, there is no purpose served in attempting to generalize broadly about local vs. nonlocal resources across the lowlands. The terms themselves are tools to help us envision the nature of the exchange relationships that might develop in an area. Questions of whether materials are abundant or restricted, found nearby or far away, considered essential or not so essential to families or in ritual, or destined to be made into different objects or used in different ways are all important criteria that should form our framework of analysis. Such terms should not be conflated universally with particular materials or items for several reasons:

1. materials found in some areas are not found in others;
2. materials found in some areas may be restricted and thereby exploited by single communities within a valley or subregion;
3. materials that are “far away” by land routes may be easily obtainable by sea routes;
4. materials are used in different ways and can be a subsistence item in one circumstance and a prestige item in another; this can be envisioned for a wide range of materials—slate, hematite and other minerals, shells (and shellfish), pottery, chert, obsidian, animal bones, stone, etc.

### ***Can Prestige Items Be Local?***

Freidel et al. (chapter 3 this volume) argue that Maya political economy incorporated not only goods that had use-value, but also goods that derived their value as much from their ideological or cosmological significance, such as jade or *Spondylus*. This observation is also particularly relevant for composite objects, such as slate-backed hematite mirrors, or to mosaics, which may incorporate materials that in another type of object would be considered mundane.

There are some problems, however, not with *Spondylus* as a new item in elite cosmology, but in Freidel et al.'s claims for its origins. If the Olmecs did not trade in *Spondylus*, may this not be because the bulk of the *Spondylus* shells and their products that appear from Maya Late Preclassic times onwards are *Spondylus americanus* and came from the Caribbean, along the coast of Belize, whereas the Olmecs' nearest access to the sea was the Gulf Coast? The bulk of the evidence from Belize during Preclassic through Postclassic times indicates that *Spondylus* occurred abundantly along the Belize coast. It occurs abundantly today, admittedly with the spines the worse for wear, washed up in mangrove swamps along the Belize coast. But the shells that appear in caches and burials with the spines in relatively good condition suggest that the Maya accessed *Spondylus* along the barrier reef. This organism occurs in specific microenvironmental zones on the reef, the parameters of which are known in marine biology, but not in great detail. *Spondylus* occurs on the reef at depths of 12 to 30 feet (Warmke and Abbott 1962) which means it is easily accessible to divers who know where to look. A recent survey carried out by Heidi Ritscher, Lisa Hilborn, Laura Howard, and I on Middle Caye, Glovers Reef Atoll, produced Maya pottery and numerous *Spondylus* shells—more than I have ever seen at a coastal site. I have not yet been able to excavate the atoll sites, but all indications are that one of the reasons the Maya journeyed to the atoll was to harvest *Spondylus* in a zone in which they occur in large numbers. *Spondylus* shells occur in deposits at all coastal sites I have excavated from Colson Point to Ambergris Caye. They seem to be the result of both gathering worn specimens in the mangrove swamps (these can be used for jewelry but, as noted above, have worn spines and seem not to have been used for caches) and reef harvesting, in which case the spines are longer and better preserved.

To look to West Mexico and Costa Rica, where *S. princeps* occurs, for the bulk of *Spondylus* that occurs at lowland sites seems illogical and unnecessary. However, that the Maya, perhaps in Late Preclassic times, were responsible for the extension of the idea of preciousness to include shell, and *Spondylus* in particular, makes a great deal of sense. The significance of *Spondylus americanus*, given its reef habitat in Belize, probably has deep roots in Maya cosmology that go back in time long before the Late Preclassic period. The Maya were in the lowlands long before the Late Preclassic (Hester et al. 1996), and indications from coastal sites I have excavated are that at least some ancient Maya groups had a long tradition of seafaring and coastal

exploitation that extended at least back as far as the Late Preclassic period, and possibly to the Middle Preclassic (Graham 1989).

*Spondylus* is a good example of an item that crosscuts categories. Beads made from *Spondylus* formed bracelets and necklaces that could be highly elaborate and associated largely with tombs or very simple and associated with simple burials (Pendergast 1979, 1982, 1990). The common occurrence of *Spondylus* bead jewelry at Belize sites would remove *Spondylus* from the list of exotics and add it to the list of local resources for all Maya living on the atolls, on the cayes, along the coast, and in communities near the coast such as Altun Ha or Lamanai. I use this as an example to show that, although I believe Freidel and colleagues are right about the new importance of *Spondylus* in Maya ruling ideology in the Late Preclassic, *Spondylus*' cosmological significance has nothing whatsoever to do with it being an exotic or a long-distance trade item in the Maya lowlands, because, at least in the case of *Spondylus americanus*, it isn't. Its significance is more likely to lie in its origins in the sea, its delicate form and color, and its incorporation because of these features into Maya mythology, a mythology that all Maya shared but portions of which elites appropriated to themselves.

### **Economic Prosperity and Trade in Northern and Coastal Belize**

Reese-Taylor and Walker (chapter 4 this volume) discuss power, economic prosperity, and trade in the Late Preclassic to Early Classic period in northern Belize. K'axob, Nohmul, and Cerros are all mentioned as early centers of power, with Cerros' role in trade a significant one. Whether control was involved or not is a moot point. I think it more likely that exchange and travel were widespread, and provided opportunities on a number of levels for people to acquire access to goods and to benefit from transporting the goods. Lamanai's monumentality suggests strongly that it was a leading center at the time. Structure N10-43 represents a massive Late Preclassic achievement (Pendergast 1981), and the Holiday House acropolis group, P9-25, represented at least triple the investment of labor and materials that went into N10-43 and appears to have spanned at least the period from the Late Preclassic to the early years of the Classic.

Although Reese-Taylor and Walker (chapter 4 this volume) report a state of decline in northern Belize from A.D. 200–400, it is not yet clear if such a decline is in evidence at Lamanai; more work is

necessary on Holiday House, for example, to determine why construction ceased there in the Early Classic but not elsewhere on the site. N10-43, for example, continued to see major modifications in the eighth century. Lamanai's two Classic period tombs date to the mid- to late fifth century. One of the tombs, that of a woman laid against the N9-58 platform (Pendergast 1981: 40), contains a black-slipped, slab-footed cylinder tripod, which Reese-Taylor and Walker generally attribute to Teotihuacan influence, and a Tzakol 3 polychrome dish very similar to that found in the contemporaneous N9-56 tomb.

Along the coast at Marco Gonzalez and farther south at Colson Point (Graham 1989; Graham and Pendergast 1989; Graham 1994), there was an intensive period of resource procurement and transshipment of ceramics associated with the Early Classic period. I have dated the peak of activity from A.D. 100 to 300 at Colson Point, but this may turn out to be too conservative, because the latest ceramics to occur in the shell middens associated with this phase are, without doubt, Tzakol 3 polychromes (Graham 1994: 212, Fig. 5.31k-m; Graham 1989: 150, 154). This strongly suggests an end to this particular brand of coastal activity at around A.D. 500 to make way for the focus on the salt trade in the Late Classic. There is evidence in the form of unslipped jars, bowls, and other forms that occupation or at least utilization of coastal sites continued, but the kinds of activities were to change markedly.

How early in time people began focusing on salt-processing remains an estimate, but the only distinctive nonutilitarian pottery that shows up at all in these Late Classic deposits (at both Colson Point and Marco Gonzalez) is in the form of sherds from Tepeu 1 polychrome vases. There is little question, then, that the salt trade was in full swing by the seventh century, and very possible earlier. This conflicts with Andrews and Mock's conclusions (chapter 11 this volume) about the timing of the Belize salt trade, which they date to the Late to Terminal Classic transition. Radiocarbon dates from Colson Point (Graham 1989: 154) add support to the salt trade as predominantly a Late Classic phenomenon, although it may well have tapered off in Terminal Classic times. At Marco Gonzalez, the salt-processing levels are incorporated into house construction, with a series of burials, dug through house floors, that contain a Jaina-style whistle figurine, plumbate and Fine Orange pottery, a late polychrome dish, and local Terminal Classic to Early Postclassic-style vessels.

It does not seem to have taken long for people from Stann Creek to Ambergris Caye to rally economically after Classic upheavals, and

to begin to produce salt for mainland communities, probably by constructing evaporation pans, and then further concentrating the salt by subjecting it to heating in standard-made bowls (Coconut Walk Unslipped) that also served as forms for the salt cakes (Graham 1994: 155–156, 247). What is interesting about these bowls is that on Ambergris Caye, the quartz sand temper used in their manufacture had to be imported from the mainland (Graham, Mazzullo, and Teal, in preparation), which suggests a degree of specialization not heretofore anticipated (McKillop, n.d.).

### Are Elites Out of Control?

West (chapter 6 this volume) points out that elite control over resources is a problematic issue in archaeology, and that few archaeologists have developed adequate methods for identifying elite control of resource acquisition. In the previous section I have outlined the results of some excavations in which I have been involved in Belize, but it is my coastal experience above all that has made me cautious about the concept of elite control. In order to learn the extent to which an influx of goods and services to elites affected Maya economic organization, it is problematic to think in terms of elite *control*; it is more productive to think in terms of elite demands. *Control* implies a role for elites that cannot be supported on the basis of present evidence. Admittedly the term is often used metaphorically, but this does not make it less problematic.

In trying to understand the accumulation of power by elites, and the ways in which some societies have been able to limit the accumulation of elite power (Clastres 1989), I have been looking not at the elites themselves, but at what could be called social compliance: why the members of any group comply with power accumulation by individuals. I do not believe that the bulk of Maya society passively allowed power to accumulate in the hands of particular elites. I take the view that all of the Maya at all levels—other elites, craftsmen, framers, traders, fisherfolk—made decisions that bore on economic development. Some of these decisions fostered compliance with elite consolidation of power; others forced it into particular molds; still others consistently and pervasively weakened elite power. It is only when we consider power as a series of embedded and ever-changing relationships that involve society in its entirety in the Maya area (as do several chapters in this volume) that we will come to understand its growth or the complexities of power and economy.

How can we continue to broaden our view of power and its relationship to resource "control"? I have started in this chapter by challenging the complacency of some of our assumptions, such as exotic vs. local and subsistence vs. prestige. Not only did elites eat, sleep, and live their lives as part of households, but their production of polychromes, for example, involved more than elite interaction and control. If elites painted polychromes, they also needed body clays, slip clays, paints, brushes, holders, resins, cleaners, paper for designs, mineral pigments, stands, wooden rollers, tempers, kilns, firewood, and sponges, not to mention help in preparing surfaces, preparing ingredients, stoking fires, regulating air flow, getting lunch on time, settling clays, toting water, ordering supplies, keeping track of transactions, training and feeding apprentices, and cleaning up the mess at the end of the production day. In other words, when I try to envision production, it is hard to see a prestige economy in action as a phenomenon that is separate from other relationships. Prestige items represent a complex series of relationships, both synchronic and diachronic, and they rely on networks of acquisition in which so-called subsistence demands are embedded.

In another example, even Feldman's evidence (1985) drawn on by Foias (chapter 8 this volume) for certain prestige items being the privilege and property of elites in sixteenth-century highland Guatemala does not necessarily mean that the acquisition of raw materials or the processing or production of these items were actually *controlled* by elites. As noted above, elite luxury items are often composite items; they are not simply precious stones or shell, or even cacao, but instead consist of these materials made into something. This was true in Classic times as well. Therefore, though elite demands for mosaics, for example, may have been a reflection of the importance of jade and shell for them, the route that *Spondylus* or jade may have taken from their sources as raw materials to their final product as a prestige item was long and complicated, involved a number of different specialists along the way, and probably also involved multiple levels of exchange. Even the reality presented in the documents of something like the highland lords controlling cacao by owning cacao plantations does *not* mean that the concept of elite control thereby explains the economic profile.

The matter of control may seem like a small point, but one analogy I pointed to at the Society for American Archaeology meeting was the modern wine trade. A strong argument can be made for wine as a luxury good, and for the idea that its trade is controlled by elites,

because the best wines in the world in any quantity go to the wealthy and the powerful. The procurement of cases of wine by wealthy families dominates transactions at the market level. The Rothschilds, some of whom are titled, grow and process wine, and could be seen as a parallel to the lords of highland Guatemala, or the Classic period lords of Tikal, who are said to have controlled cacao via trade or tribute. Either way, the involvement of elites is only part of a complex picture. Although it is possible to conceive that a market in wine might be controlled by elites in areas where grapes don't grow, this depends even in the modern world on the importance placed on wine culturally. In places such as France and Italy, where wine is culturally part of the subsistence diet, its consumption and distribution operate on a number of levels, even in areas where grapes do not grow, because of wine's cultural and culinary (and perhaps religious or symbolic) importance. Where Italians have moved to the Americas, even in areas where wine grapes cannot be grown, they acquire wine by a variety of means; many import grapes in order to make wine at home, as my grandparents did. And wine would be classed here as a subsistence item. In Mesoamerica, and particularly throughout the lowland tropical forest where cacao grows naturally, it is very difficult to imagine elite demands for cacao providing the sole structuring element of the cacao-growing economy. That elite demands for cacao in tribute *stimulated* production at a particular level within the economy is not debatable; but that their demands are the only paint in the picture of the economic (or culinary or ideological or cosmological) place of cacao in the lowlands is, in contrast, highly debatable.

Some scholars suggest that Maya polities were centralized and that ruling elites controlled the economy at all levels, whereas others see the Maya state as small-scale with little elite control. My point is that, either way, elites and nonelites both configured the structure of the economy, including the political economy, and that even in cases of what appear to be elite control, nonelites structure the product.

### ***Control over Pottery Production***

The data from Lamanai are being examined for information on how pottery production changed from the Classic to Postclassic period. To date, stylistic analysis of ceramics from middens and burials shows that, like the situation in the Petexbatun region (Foias, chapter 8 this volume), production of polychrome serving wares diminished in the Terminal Classic. However, unlike the Petexbatun,

production of serving wares continues well into the thirteenth century, but the specifics of form and color change. Shallow serving bowls or dishes with polychrome painting overlap with and then give way to varieties of what Thompson originally called San José V redware outcurved bowls (Thompson 1939: 141), and what Gifford types as Roaring Creek Red (Gifford 1976: 241). Some are slipped red, whereas others have the characteristic Daylight Orange decoration (Gifford 1976: 301–302). The slips become orange, the pedestal increases in height, and by A.D. 1100, the serving inventory is orange-slipped, with incised decoration, and in forms that differ markedly from Classic times. Utilitarian vessels continue to be made, but their forms, and apparently their paste composition (L. Howie-Langs, personal communication), change as well. The indication is that demands had changed, but not enough evidence has been amassed yet to support claims of centralized production. Mass production is indicated by the widespread use of press-molds, but the transition from the Late Classic to Postclassic was so gradual—and the range of forms neither drastically reduced nor increased—that we cannot yet say what role centralization of production might have had.

### A Final Note

To know the exotic, one must know the local; to know how prestige is manifested, we need to know the ideological and social factors that reinforce what we call prestige, but also the local economic complicity factors: how agricultural production, trade, and exchange at multiple levels function to allow some resources to be directed to activities such as the production and painting of polychrome vases. The symbolism and social value of these vases may have been meaningful only within an elite context, but the vases nonetheless represent complex economic forces that include multiple levels of exchange. Without seeing economic production as a full set of social relationships of production, we cannot understand political economy.

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