Excavations at the Marco Gonzalez Site, Ambergris Cay, Belize, 1986

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Excavations at the small site of Marco Gonzalez at the tip of an offshore cay, or coral island, off the northern coast of Belize yielded evidence of occupation from early in the Christian era to perhaps as late as the beginning of the Spanish contact period, ca. A.C. 1544. During the community's apogee, ca. A.C. 1150–1300, its material culture closely resembled that of the Postclassic center of Lamanai on the New River Lagoon in northern Belize. The resemblance suggests that other cultural links also tied the two communities to each other. The data add significantly to a growing body of information on Maya use of the cays; they also extend our understanding of southern lowlands Postclassic developments and of Lamanai's role therein.

Introduction

Following a brief reconnaissance in 1984 of the previously unrecorded ancient Maya site of Marco Gonzalez, a team from the Royal Ontario Museum undertook excavation of portions of the site, which is situated at the southern tip of Ambergris Cay (FIG. 1), in April and May of 1986 (Graham and Pendergast 1987; Pendergast and Graham 1987). The site had not been recorded prior to our 1984 visit, and hence we bestowed upon it the name of our guide. In the recording system of the Department of Archaeology of the Ministry of Education and Tourism of Belize, the site is now designated as 39/197-1. Marco Gonzalez lies approximately 8 km south of the town of San Pedro, nearly at the center of a small westward-trending element of Ambergris Cay south of Laguna de Boca Chica (FIG. 2), at about Lat. 17° 52′45″ N and Long. 88° 0′54″ W. The site's distinctive vegetation resulted in clear delineation of the area on the 4499P colored 1980, Edition 4, 1:50,000 map of the cay (reference CQ925773).

Our reconnaissance had pointed to links between the Postclassic occupation at Marco Gonzalez and the Buk Phase, ca. A.C. 1100–1300 (Graham 1987a: 81–86), at the major center of Lamanai (see Pendergast 1981a, 1982b, 1986), some 182 km away by river and sea; the 1986 test excavations provided solid documentation of those links, and also enabled us to delineate some aspects of both earlier and later use of the cay site.

Our emphasis on the water rather than land distance between the sites of Lamanai and Marco Gonzalez stems from our belief that any bulk transport of goods would have been effected by water rather than by land. This is not to say that communication and trade did not take place overland; the overland route, however, is markedly unattractive because the traversable tracts of land are interspersed with vast areas of swampland. Owing to the nature of the drainage patterns and subsurface soils, most of the swamps run for considerable distances N–S, and a very circuitous route must be taken around these numerous barriers. As a result, the New River appears to us most likely to have served as the principal avenue between Lamanai and Marco Gonzalez.

Although we cannot document continuous use of the site from the Late Preclassic onward, our excavations provide ceramic and stratigraphic evidence of occupation from perhaps 100 B.C. through at least the early 14th century A.C., with some continuing human presence, but a sharply lowered level of construction activity, in the ensuing 100–150 years. The island environment along Belize's barrier reef seems more fragile and subject to change than any on the mainland because of the following circumstances: constant growth of the reef and corresponding shifting of the above-water land; the major reshapings wrought by hurricanes; smaller alterations effected along the windward side by heavy seas; and a variety of other destabilizing factors. Although we are very far from being able to reconstruct the environment during the early period of settlement, there is no question that the site as it exists today differs significantly from the community of Classic, and even Postclassic, times.

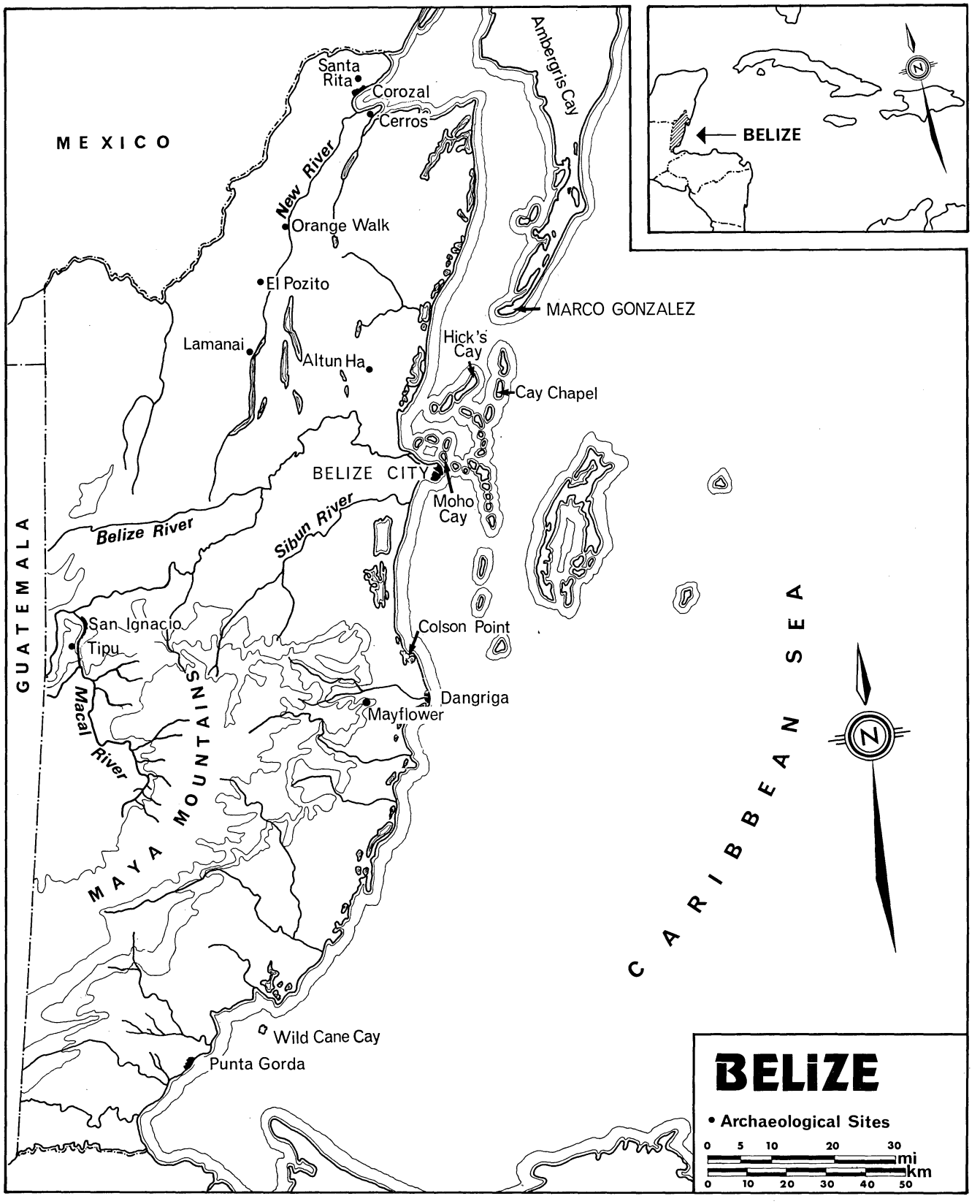


Figure 1. Map of Belize showing the location of Marco Gonzalez, other archaeological sites, and modern communities.

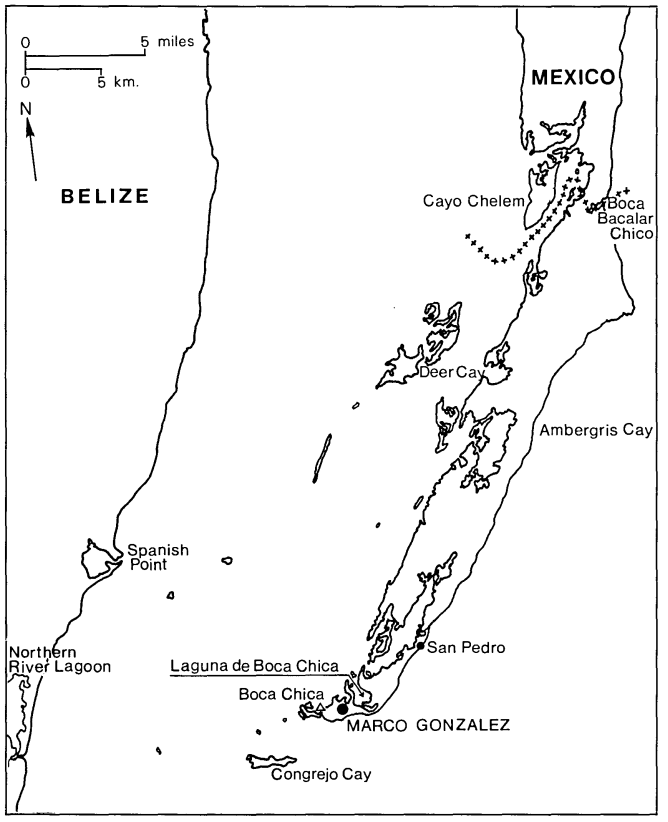


Figure 2. Detailed map of Ambergris Cay and environs.

Environmental Conditions

Marco Gonzalez is now a relatively small area of elevated terrain (ca. 355 m × 185 m) surrounded by mangrove swamp, an environment that has been given the useful collective descriptor "mangal" (Macnae 1968: 75). Red mangrove (*Rhizophora mangle*) characterizes areas of year-round inundation, whereas white mangrove (*Laguncularia racemosa*) occurs on higher ground in distinctive stages of growth and development that seem to reflect microenvironmental conditions. The mangal contrasts sharply with the vegetation of the archaeological site, and its appearance is deceptively homogeneous. Even an archaeologist's eye, however, can detect changes in the mangrove vegetation that seem to vary with drainage, height above sea level, force of the prevailing winds, and proximity to the archaeological remains. Since we know through testing that archaeological debris underlies mangrove stands in some areas, we may ultimately be able to relate the characteristics of certain stands to conditions created by ancient occupation. Northwest of the site, on the leeward side of the cay, coastal sands support red and white mangrove, buttonwood, sea-grape, and palmetto. South and east of the site in the narrow strip along the shore stands littoral forest, occasionally invaded by coconut palms (Wright et al. 1959: 300).

The site itself is distinguished by vegetation that contrasts sharply with the surrounding swamp. The dominant trees on and among the structures are gumbolimbo (*Bursera simaruba* L.) and white poisonwood, or *chechem* (*Cameraria belizensis* Standl.); other principal forms include saltwater or silver palmettos (*Thrinax* sp.), a small number of cabbage palms (*Roystonea oleracea*), and a variety of vines, sedges, and grasses (FIG. 3). Scattered coconut palms are testimony of the site's former status as a coconut plantation.

The fact that the modern vegetational assemblage at Marco Gonzalez is distinct from that of the surrounding area suggests the existence of a strong relationship between Precolumbian use of the site (land-clearing, refuse disposal, artificial in-filling) and the character of the subsequent vegetational succession (Graham in press). A possible explanation is that the soils are enriched by the decomposition of Precolumbian organic refuse, which includes large quantities of fish and shellfish remains, with resultant nutrient levels that combine with the good drainage brought about by elevation of occupation and construction levels to support vegetation easily distinguishable from surrounding assemblages. As indicated at many other coastal sites in Belize, participant species of what we might call "occupation-stimulated" assemblages (which usually include broadleaf trees and cultivars) differ from site to site, apparently as a reflection of local or regional edaphic conditions. Though some species, such as *Achras zapota*, are emerging as possible single indicators of Precolumbian utilization of coastal areas, the vegetational assemblage as a whole is a more reliable indicator of ancient occupation than is any particular species (Graham 1983: 48).

In addition to the environmental effects of Maya occupation, the Marco Gonzalez area has been altered by a phenomenon of very considerable significance to the study of ancient use of the cays: a rise in sea level of about 60 cm in the past 2000 years, accompanied in the environs of the site by accretion on the windward side of the cay (S. J. Mazzullo and Al Reid, personal communication, 1986). The sea-level change means that the now-inundated terrain around the site was once high and dry, and hence the occupiable area was considerably more extensive than what is recognizable as Marco Gonzalez today. The site would have been open to windward breezes, and unquestionably more attractive for habitation than it is at present, though probably protected by a narrower beach front than now exists.

Structures and Construction Techniques

Within the 6.6-ha area of the site lie at least 49 structures; those at the north end are generally formally arranged, with occasional *plazuela* (small plaza) groupings, while elsewhere the site plan appears more informal, probably as the result of concealment of a number of very low structure platforms (FIG. 4). All structures at the site are comparatively low platforms that range in height from 30 cm to 4.2 m.

Principal core materials utilized in platform construction at Marco Gonzalez were irregular blocks of reefstone (compacted, partly stratified, dead coral) probably quarried on the leeward side of the cay, enormous quantities of shells, and midden (FIG. 5). Facings, where present, are also of reefstone, with occasional small quantities of mainland limestone (identified by S. J. Mazzullo). Shells utilized in core construction are primarily queen conch (*Strombus gigas* L.) and West Indian chank (*Turbinella angulata* Solander), but emperor helmet (*Cassis madagascariensis* L.), brown conch (*Melongena melongena* L.), tulip (*Fasciolaria tulipa* L.), princess venus (*Antigona listeri* Gray), tellins, chiones, and donax also occur. On the basis of excavations in Structures 27 and 28 (FIG. 4), these two buildings plus the heavily looted Structure 26 probably contain more than 50,000 large conch, chank, and helmet shells, plus an unspecifiable number of shells of smaller species. As a reflection of the shellfish collecting activities of Marco Gonzalez' inhabitants the contents of these three structures, as well as those of Structure 31 and several other small platforms built very largely of shells, are truly impressive. They also document the absence of strong ecological concerns within the community, for they include a very appreciable quantity of juveniles, especially of conch and chank.

The construction at Marco Gonzalez appears at present to be a variation on the theme in evidence elsewhere on the cays. Use of coral blocks is documented on Cay Chapel, approximately 22 km south of the site (Craig 1966: 21), and on Wild Cane Cay in extreme southern Belize (Gann 1975: 280; the original typescript reference to reefstone is incorrectly transcribed in the publication as "roofstone"). The structures investigated by Gann combined reefstone blocks with earth, stones, sand, and coral, a mix of building materials that appears to include imports from the mainland, as did a platform excavated in 1982, which contained sandstone slabs (unpublished account by Lawrence J. Jackson and Heather McKillop). Importation of mainland material also appears to have occurred on Hick's Cay, but not on Cay Chapel (Craig 1966: 21). No specific percentage estimate can be made, but it is clear that imported stone was no more than a minimal element in Marco Gonzalez construction. Hence we assume that transport of stone involved small amounts borne by canoes engaged in other commerce, rather than major quantities imported by rafting or other means.

Chronology, Settlement, and Economy

The substantial nature of Marco Gonzalez construction, at least in Early and Middle Postclassic times, combines

Figure 3. Vegetation in the southern portion of Marco Gonzalez following removal of underbrush.

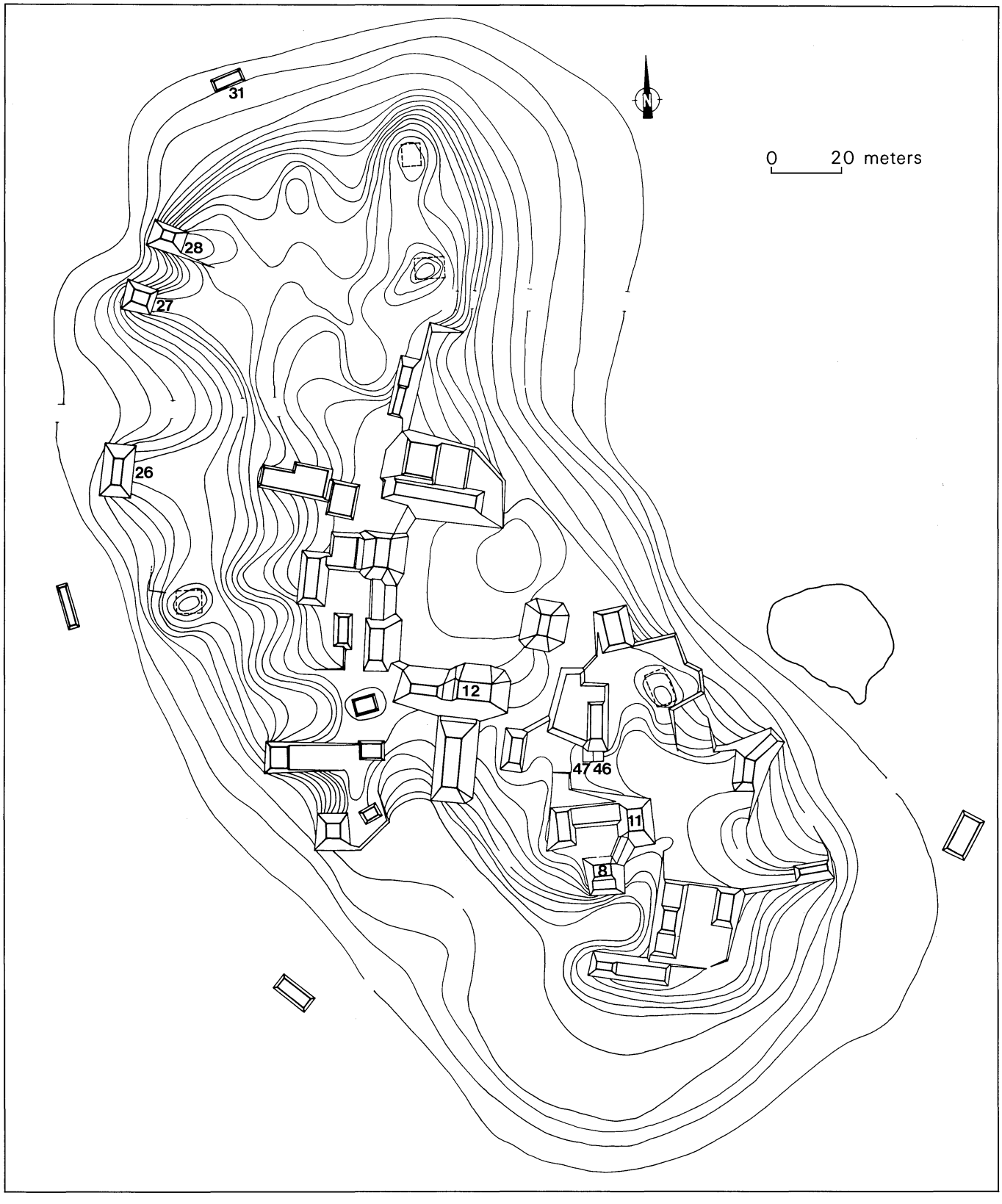


Figure 4. Marco Gonzalez site plan. Contour interval 10 cm; outermost contour 20 cm above sea level. Survey and drafting by Claude Belanger.

Figure 5. Structure 31 during excavation, showing high shell content in platform core.

with some features of site plan to suggest that the community enjoyed permanent occupation rather than the intermittent use posited for fishing or shellfish collecting stations on many of the cays. The quantity and quality of material culture remains likewise bespeak activity well above the level of marine resource exploitation, and a richness of existence that is more likely to have been associated with year-round residence than to have been the product of periodic use of the site in response to mainland community food requirements or to seasonal shifts in seafood supplies.

Excavations in Structures 11 and 12 revealed a series of plaster floors, generally of a quality markedly inferior to that encountered in mainland sites. The floors atop Structure 12 were marked with considerable numbers of pits and postholes; the size and distribution of the postholes indicates that the masonry platform supported timber-and-thatch construction. In addition, floors in both structures were pierced by at least one large pit that extended into the core and contained extensive waterlaid microstratification at its base. The significance of the microstratification is far from clear, but the patterning as well as the composition of most of the strata suggests that the pits lay open to the elements for protracted periods. The major pit in Structure 12 yielded a large quantity of perforated discs probably made of oyster shell, as well as other artifacts, but neither here nor in Structure 11 can the function of the features be identified.

Evidence from Late Preclassic times is thus far limited to sherds from Classic construction contexts. A single burial from beneath the site's first identifiable large-area floor construction, encountered below and in front of Structure 12, is the earliest in situ evidence; a fragmentary jar apparently associated with the interment fixes the date of construction as probably not later than A.C. 200–250. Data on the burial are few, owing to the fact that the entire 77 cm of core beneath the floor is below the water table, which throughout the site center lies at modern sea level. It is this stratigraphic situation that supports the findings of Mazzullo and Reid, for the depth of core corresponds closely to the amount of sea-level rise postulated for the period since the floor was constructed. The burial situation reflects a problem that exists in many places along the Belize coast: knowledge of early activity is limited by the fact that much of the material lies submerged in seawater (see Graham in press).

Although the burial and random sherds give us a probable beginning point for the occupation, they obviously tell us nothing about the economic base of the early community, or about other reasons for choice of the spot for habitation. Fish and shellfish remains from the deposit around the burial and from later middens and construction cores, however, suggest that marine resource exploitation was important from the outset at Marco Gonzalez, and continued throughout most of the site's history.

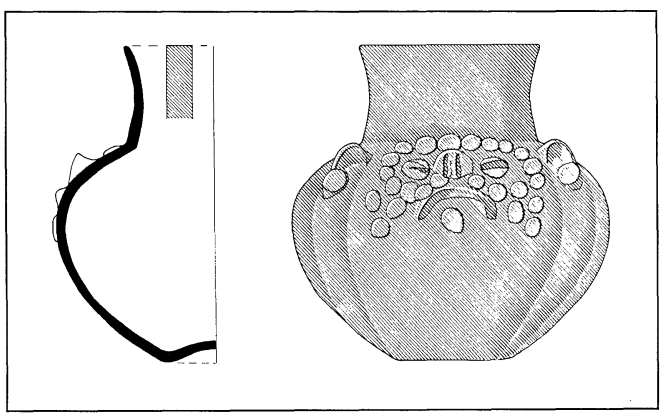
A second aspect of the economy, saltworking, is in evidence only in Late Classic times (ca. A.C. 600–800). At some time during this period, intensive processing activity in the area where Structure 12 was later built resulted in amassing of more than a meter of stratified

deposit composed of layers of charcoal in which were embedded sherds from thin, crudely made, and poorly fired shallow bowls or dishes (see Pendergast and Graham 1987: 40). Deposits almost identical to these were encountered farther south in Belize at one of the coastal sites at Colson Point, where stratigraphic and radiocarbon evidence argues for a date in the first half of the Late Classic continuum (Graham in press, 1983: 160–163). The nature of these deposits at both Marco Gonzalez and Colson Point suggests they represent one of the stages in ancient evaporative extraction of salt from sea water. The shallow bowls have an analog and homolog in the vessels used in present-day highland salt processing (Reina and Monaghan 1981: 23–29).

Saltworking apparently declined in importance towards the end of the Late Classic period, or at least the extraction methods of which we have evidence changed or were abandoned. It is beyond question, however, that occupation at the site continued, and that in fact the peak was reached some four centuries later. From the late 10th or the 11th century there is evidence of trade contacts in the form of Tohil plumbate (see Shepard 1948: 143–147), most of which occurs as sherds of Tlaloc-effigy and other vessels that make up less than 1% of ceramic samples recovered from later midden and construction-core contexts. This ware is also represented by a whole orange-variant jar (FIG. 6) decorated with a face that has several bat-like features and is surrounded by appliqué bosses. The decorated area retains traces of blue paint, which was apparently not applied to the remainder of the surface. The vessel accompanied the burial of a mature adult female in the second major modification of Structure 11.

The vessel form, classified by Shepard (1948: 30) as a button-face jar, is of limited distribution in Mesoamerica. Reported examples come from Tomb 10 at Copán, Honduras (Gordon 1925: plate XII); Hacienda Nueva, Tenancingo, El Salvador (Shepard 1948: 109); Monte Albán, Oaxaca (Shepard 1948: 105); Huexotla, D.F. (Seler 1915: 252); and an unspecified Mexican locale (Shepard 1948: fig. 19a).

Figure 6. Plumbate button-face jar from Burial 11/7; height 13.9 cm. This and all other pottery drawings by Louise Belanger.



Plumbate ware has been recovered at San Juan, at the north end of Ambergris Cay, where together with other material it represents what appears to be the site's latest occupation (Guderjan, Garber, and Smith in press). With no representation of the button-face jar, plumbate also occurs at Lamanai, but only as three surface sherds in a sample of approximately 1.1 million. In contrast, the ware is found in some quantity in surface lots at El Pozito (Joseph Ball, personal communication, 1982). Association with the final occupation is also indicated at Quirigua, where the ware occurs in small amounts in the latest platform core of the acropolis (Robert Sharer, personal communication, 1988). The distribution of plumbate on the Yucatán-Campeche coast is set forth by Ball (1978: 115–116); it also occurs at Isla Cerritos, off the NE coast of the peninsula, as less than 0.7% of the sample from the Jotuto Sotuta Complex, for which there are radiocarbon dates that range from A.C. 930 to 1152 (Andrews et al. 1986: tables 2, 3). Dates from El Salvador are in quite close agreement, with a range from A.C. 922 to 1010 (Bruhns 1980: 845), and an A.C. 900–1100+ date applies to Tohil plumbate that occurs in quantity in the Remanso Phase at Izapa, Chiapas (Lee 1973: 82–83, figs. 1, 9–11).

Ceramics from the final reflooring in Structure 11 at Marco Gonzalez indicate a date for this construction phase not later than A.C. 1250–1300. The burial that yielded the button-face jar was sealed by the plaster floor of a unit two phases earlier than the final flooring. Based on an estimate of the time elapsed between the burial event and the final reflooring, we propose a date between A.C. 1000 and 1100 for the burial.

Although the sample from the Terminal Classic and the opening years of the Postclassic is far from satisfactory, there is clear evidence of continuing construction and use in Structures 11 and 12 through this period. The variety and quantity of San José V-related redware bowls and basins (a widespread Terminal Classic form in Belize; see Thompson 1939: 140–141, fig. 78; Graham 1987a: 78) in the Marco Gonzalez sample provide evidence that the continuity from the Terminal Classic to the Early Postclassic documented at Lamanai (Pendergast 1986: 227–234) may have characterized life at the cay site as well. As at Lamanai, however, it is not until the 12th century that a substantial increase in construction and site utilization is well documented.

Excavation and surface examination (which in a number

of cases unfortunately involved sifting through looters' backdirt) yielded pottery demonstrating that every structure at Marco Gonzalez saw construction or use in a period that extended from about the mid-1100s to the end of the following century. It is clear that the community not only continued to prosper, but also expanded considerably in this century and a half; at the very least, the NW portion of the site saw large-scale new building in the form of Structures 26, 27, and 28 (FIG. 4), and it is apparent that a number of the other buildings came into being at this time as well. Other aspects of life paralleled the burst of construction activity, and the overall picture is one of a wealthy, substantial, and vigorous community—despite the fact that these adjectives had long since ceased to be applicable to most of the centers that lay within reach of Marco Gonzalez during the Classic.

The Lamanai Ceramic Connection

The only major center that is known at present to have survived the Classic collapse and to have continued to function as an important community throughout the Postclassic is Lamanai, although there is increasingly persuasive evidence that events may have followed a generally similar course at Tipu, much farther to the south and west (FIG. 1). Marco Gonzalez sheds significant light on the role of Lamanai in northern Belize, and almost certainly in the lowlands in general, because the apogee at the cay site was marked by the presence of ceramics directly related to those of the Buk Phase (see Graham 1987a: figs. 4, 5) at Lamanai. A series of radiocarbon dates from Lamanai (Pendergast 1981a: 48–49) and extensive stratigraphic evidence from that site anchor the Buk Phase to about A.C. 1140–1300; ceramic similarities and the stratigraphic sequence suggest that approximately the same span applies to the Marco Gonzalez assemblage.

Lamanai-related Buk Phase ceramics occur at a number of sites in Belize, such as Altun Ha (Pendergast 1982a: 42, 140, figs. 12g and 81d); Mayflower (Graham 1983: 243, 245, fig. 163a, b); Negroman-Tipu (Graham 1987a: 86); Barton Ramie (Gifford 1976: 311, fig. 207); possibly Moho Cay (McKillop 1980: fig. 62); and Turneffe Island (MacKie 1963: fig. 65l, s). In contrast with the foregoing occurrences, which all involve small amounts of material, Marco Gonzalez is the first known source of large amounts of Buk Phase ceramics apart from Lamanai itself. To those unfamiliar with the culture history of the Maya lowlands, this would seem at first to stand merely as interesting evidence of the eastern boundary of a ceramic style. Its importance, however, lies in the fact that the style is a manifestation of a substantial and flourishing Postclassic presence—a period that, as the name "Postclassic" implies, was once thought of more in terms of an absence than of a presence. The Classic collapse was thought to have left the southern lowlands, including Belize, lacking in nucleated population centers and devoid of viable economies.

With the ghost of the Classic collapse still haunting the Postclassic landscape, the quantity of Buk-related pottery at Marco Gonzalez seems staggering; in some contexts, the yield per cubic meter of midden exceeds that of the richest sources at Lamanai. Equally as important as the amount of material present is the indication that the pottery is not of Lamanai manufacture. Despite a very considerable number of stylistic similarities between the Marco Gonzalez and Lamanai ceramic inventories, naked-eye comparisons of pastes and surface treatments reveal that the pottery from the two sites is not identical. The Marco Gonzalez vessels either reached the community from another site or sites that have yet to be identified, or they are a local product. So far, few clay sources are known on Ambergris Cay, and only one, near the cay's north end, yields material apparently suitable for vessel manufacture (S. J. Mazzullo, personal communication, 1986); nevertheless, the presence of a flourishing Lamanai-influenced pottery works at 12th- and 13th-century Marco Gonzalez remains a distinct possibility.

The range of Marco Gonzalez vessel shapes, the general nature and the execution of incised surface decoration, and the slip colors and treatments closely resemble those of Lamanai ceramics, but there is little that is exactly the same in the two collections. Although the insight born of the Marco Gonzalez work has led to recognition of two "cay-style" chalices among the Lamanai burial vessels, it appears that shared cultural norms in pottery manufacture and use, rather than direct trade, formed the principal bond between the two communities. The makers of the vessels found at Marco Gonzalez followed the patterns that guided their confreres at Lamanai, but often executed vessels, especially censers, in sizes far smaller than the standard at the major center.

The principal forms that make up the Marco Gonzalez assemblage are very largely those that are primary markers of the Buk Phase at Lamanai (Graham 1987a: 81–88). They include pedestal-base censers (FIG. 7A–I; see Pendergast 1981a: fig. 20; 1982b: fig. 12c for generally comparable material), chalices (FIG. 7J; see Pendergast 1981a: fig. 15 for form and decoration layout), and a variety of tripod bowls and dishes with human-head, animal-head, and other supports (FIG. 8A–H), as well as round-side bowls without supports (FIG. 8J, N). Slipped jars (FIG. 8T) are extremely common, and miniature versions of these and other forms (FIG. 8K, P, S) occur with some frequency as well. Heavy, unslipped dishes or bowls with an im-

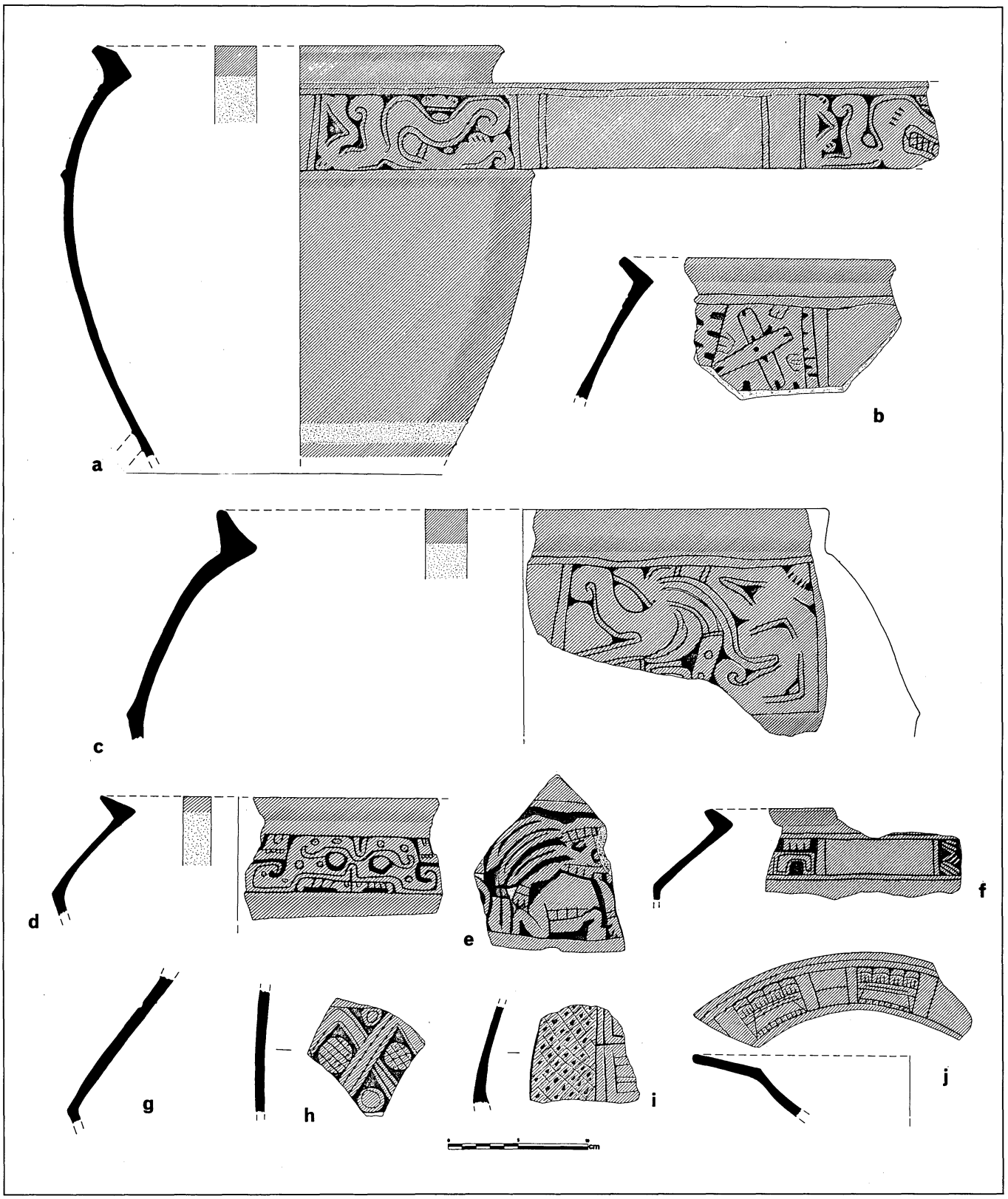


Figure 7. Censers (A–I) and chalice rim fragment (J), Buk Phase related, ca. A.C. 1150–1300; E, G, H, and I are motifs from censer shoulder areas.

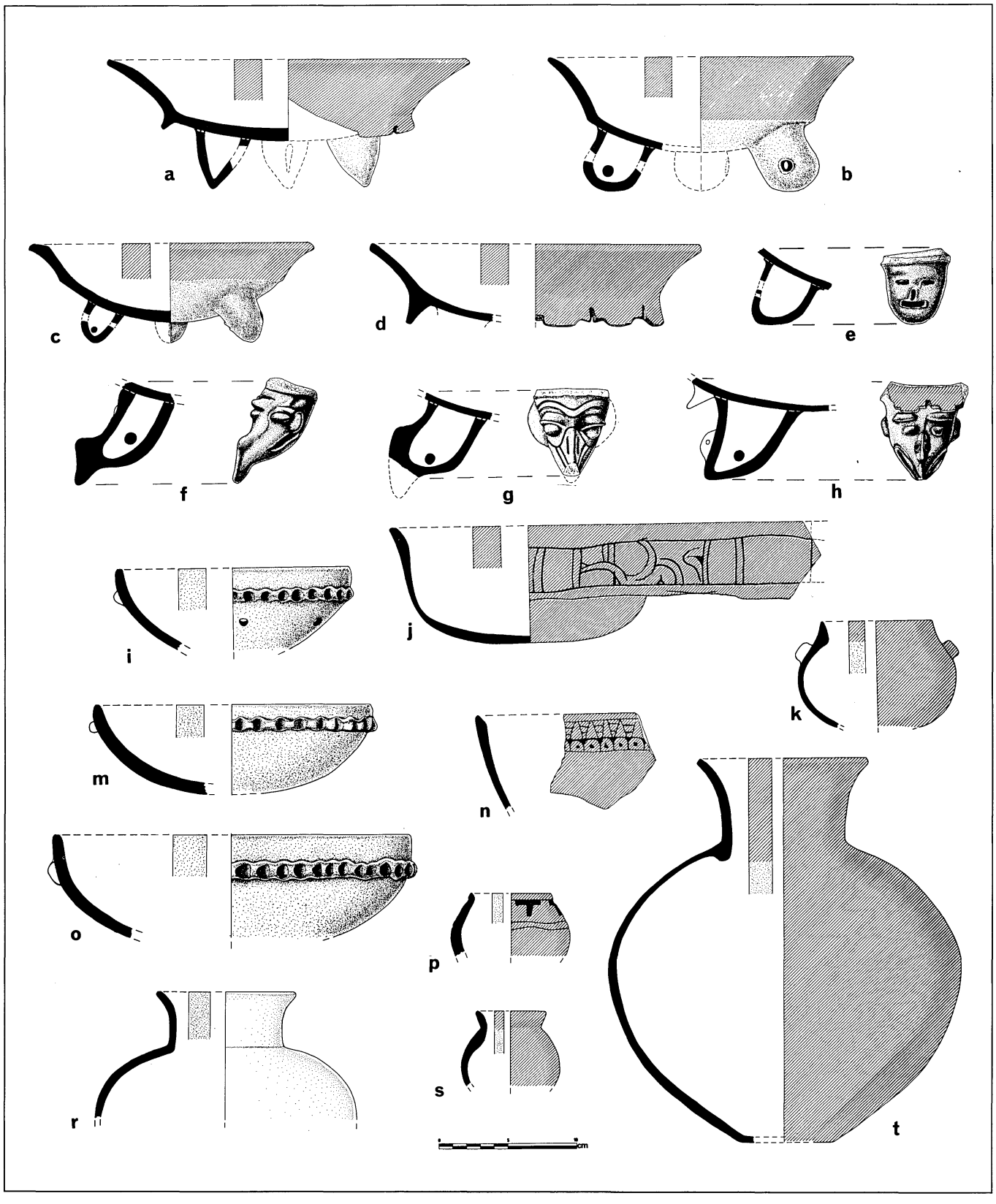


Figure 8. Bowls and jars, Buk Phase related, ca. A.C. 1150–1300.

pressed applied fillet below the rim (FIG. 8I, M, O) are likewise a significant element in the Buk-related assemblage, but they are unknown in the Lamanai collection from this period.

Marco Gonzalez embellishment of vessel surfaces involves use of some of the reptilian and crocodilian motifs in vogue at Lamanai (FIG. 7A, C), as elsewhere in the Maya lowlands Postclassic (see Rice 1983). Many of the motifs employed at Marco Gonzalez bear close resemblance to those at Lamanai, but virtually all were wrought with a heavier hand. Very frequently, reptilian motifs are replaced by naturalistic or geometric designs foreign to the Lamanai repertoire (FIG. 7B, D–I). Marco Gonzalez chalices differ from those at Lamanai not only in the predominance of a "sunburst" motif with central *Kin* cross on pedestal bases but also in the common, but not uniform, use of decoration on the interior rim (FIG. 7J). Decoration of round-side bowls (FIG. 8J, N) is generally similar to that at Lamanai, but less elaborate, and the supports of tripod bowls and dishes likewise resemble Lamanai material in concept, but are sharply different in detail.

Slip colors are orange, as at Lamanai, but in general the tone is lighter than at the major center, and a number of colors are farther into the yellow range than any employed in Lamanai's Buk Phase ceramics. We do not yet know whether the distinctive appearance of Marco Gonzalez slips relates to the nature of the clay(s) employed, or reflects deliberate choice. Firing practices generally appear to have paralleled those inferred for Lamanai; the presence of a dark, unoxidized core characterizes the pottery of both sites.

There is no question that, with the exception of the fillet-decorated unslipped dishes and bowls, the Marco Gonzalez ceramics could be subsumed within the Buk Phase as it is constituted at Lamanai. There is also no question that the island manifestation of the phase goes well beyond slavish copying, and embodies very considerable independence of approach. This suggests that, in spite of links between Marco Gonzalez and Lamanai, the cay community followed its own course in very large part, unrestricted by the dictates of style, and perhaps even those of politics, that emanated from the mainland center.

Although Marco Gonzalez obviously defines the eastern edge of the zone of distribution of the Lamanai Buk Phase pottery style, it is not possible at present to identify the style in the intervening area, along the course of the New River. Extensive excavation of Postclassic remains at Santa Rita, near the river mouth, has failed to yield Buk Phase pottery (Chase 1982: 493–543), and the ceramic assemblage likewise appears to be absent at Cerros, which lies on the water route and saw high occupation density in the Postclassic (Scarborough 1980: 295–297, tables IV, V). El Pozito, which lies just 30 km north of Lamanai and is linked to the New River by a small tributary stream, also seems to lack Buk Phase pottery; sharp ceramic differences between Lamanai and El Pozito appear, in fact, to identify a boundary that had considerable significance as regards exchange of goods in the lowland Maya area in Postclassic times.

It is unquestionably dangerous to argue on the basis of rather thin negative evidence, but it appears at present that the ties that bound Marco Gonzalez to Lamanai did not embrace intervening sites along the water route. The gap could be interpreted as an indication that transmission of ideas involved a shorter, more directly W–E route that combined land and water, or that intervening sites along the water route did not participate in the Postclassic florescence that characterized Lamanai and Marco Gonzalez. The matter of evidence for links along the water route merits further pursuit for the light it may shed on sociopolitical organization in Postclassic northern Belize. There is already considerable evidence that sociopolitical organization in northern Belize was complex throughout prehistory, and is reflected by more than one ceramic tradition from as early as Late Classic times (A. Chase 1986: 123–124; D. Chase 1986: 375; Pring 1976: 43–45).

Other Artifacts and the Evidence for Trade

Beyond the realm of ceramics, the artifact inventory from Marco Gonzalez' zenith period is not yet extensive, but nevertheless includes objects that parallel the quality exemplified by the pottery. Chief among these is a carved peccary (*Tayassu* sp.) humerus (FIG. 9) that was recovered by a San Pedro boy from among the human bones strewn around a looter's pit in Structure 8. No burial ceramics remained in the looting debris, but core sherds fix the date of the construction as contemporaneous with the Buk Phase or later. The bone, presumably a burial accompaniment and of local manufacture, is less elaborately, and somewhat less skillfully, carved than a 15th-century object from Lamanai that may have had a similar function (Pendergast 1981b). Its decoration of a human figure in scrolled breechcloth and feather headdress with frontal scrolls, beneath a mat motif edged with simple scrolls, demonstrates that during Marco Gonzalez' peak years artistic achievement of quite high quality was not manifested in pottery embellishment alone.

What we have interpreted as wealth—reflected in the presence of fine pottery, carved bone, jade, and obsidian both in burials and in middens—is probably a consequence of the activities that formed the socioeconomic base of community life at Marco Gonzalez. It seems un-

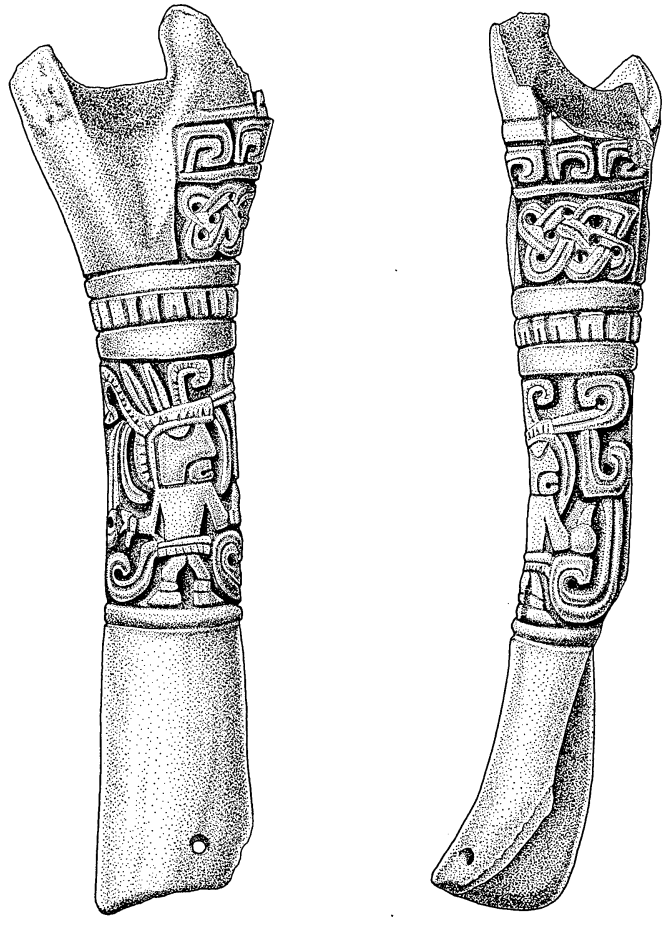


Figure 9. Carved peccary humerus from Structure 8; length 19.8 cm. Drawing by Louise Belanger.

likely that this base of presumed economic strength was derived solely from a demand for seafood and other marine products at mainland centers, although such a demand may have been partly responsible for the operational mechanisms that facilitated expanded, marine-oriented economic activities. Although the ancient Maya market for marine products may have varied diachronically, there is little reason to suspect that it ever reached such a nadir that a rebound would have resulted in the sudden burgeoning of a site at the tip of Ambergris Cay. Even if this was what transpired as marine products became a valuable commodity, the phenomenon would not explain the choice of site, the expanded construction of relatively elaborate buildings, and the presence of a variety of imported materials. To put it another way, even if marine-resource exploitation provided the sole economic base for the community, why was consumption made so conspicuous at that particular location?

We are in the process of examining the possibility that the site's location conferred on it some special importance in a network of trade that encompassed both inland and coastal communities. One of the arguments in favor of such an interpretation is the fact that vessel classes found in high concentration at Marco Gonzalez are known to have figured importantly in ritual activity at Lamanai. This suggests strongly that practical household use cannot account for their presence at Marco Gonzalez. Some of the vessels may have been used for ritual purposes, but the level of ritual activity likely to have characterized the community would not have necessitated their manufacture or importation in such numbers. That the vessels were brought to Marco Gonzalez for redistribution is not the only other possible explanation, but given the site's maritime location and accessibility to canoe traffic, it is one that seems highly plausible.

Some sort of trade or exchange, or at least business abroad, is also suggested by the presence of exotics—that is, items that cannot be obtained on the cay—such as gray obsidian, Pachuca green obsidian (identified by Michael Spence [personal communication, 1984]), jade, chert, granite, mainland limestone, and vessel types that appear to be from Yucatán. The form that trade activities would have taken remains to be examined in detail, but data recovered thus far show that the exploration of exchange relationships will be a major element in future work on the cay.

The community's setting at the tip of Ambergris Cay surely gave its inhabitants a strategic overview of waterborne transport headed both for the open Caribbean and for the mouths of the Rio Hondo, New River, and lagoon-river systems such as that at Northern River Lagoon. The question of whether this involved any sort of "control" or not is best left open until more is known about the material culture of the Marco Gonzalez community. The term "control" is in any case a loaded one, and warrants more definition than is appropriate here (see Graham 1987c: 761–763). The community's impact on aquatic commerce could have stemmed from a role as gatekeeper, either as an independently achieved status or as one linked to Lamanai's Postclassic political and economic strength. Similar service for other river-linked centers is of course a possibility as well. On the other hand, "controls" might have been imposed at the indirect, but perhaps more effective, level of offering to seafaring traffic both products and services that were unavailable elsewhere.

Together with materials from earlier contexts, the Postclassic imports reinforce the image of Marco Gonzalez as a center well above the level of a fishing station. They also show that neither size nor location isolated the community from the networks through which goods spread throughout Mesoamerica.

Figure 10. Jadeite celt from Structure 12, Cache 2; length 20 cm. Drawing by Emil Hustiu.

The Period of Decline

The economic bubble of the 12th and 13th centuries A.C. seems to have burst, or at least to have deflated to a tiny version of its former self, some time between 1300 and 1400. During this century, and perhaps quite early in its span, the massive pottery use that marked preceding years diminished to so low a level as to be virtually unrecognizable in the archaeological record. At the same time construction activity came to a near halt, from which it was never to recover to any level approaching that of the 12th and 13th centuries. Use of buildings without further modification could of course have continued through the ensuing years; if such extended use did in fact occur, however, most buildings examined yielded nothing either in architecture or in abutting midden that tells us so. One plausible conclusion is that 14th-century Marco Gonzalez saw significant decline in its population, or at least a decline in the material manifestation of human presence. Evidence from Structure 12 suggests, however, that the demographic upheaval fell somewhere short of complete abandonment.

Following its construction, which clearly occurred after A.C. 800 and may well have taken place early in the Postclassic, Structure 12 saw a series of modifications that is quite likely to have extended into the 16th century. Subsequent to the final construction, and perhaps after abandonment of the structure, several offerings were deposited immediately below the building's surface; among these is a large jadeite (X-ray diffraction identification, Mineralogy Department, Royal Ontario Museum) celt, partly carved into human form (FIG. 10), which appears to have been accompanied by fragments of one or more figurine censers related in style to Chen Mul Modelled censers from Mayapan and to Lamanai variations on the theme (Pendergast 1981a: fig. 27). Nearby offerings consisted of an unslipped, originally stuccoed pedestal-base bowl adorned with a figure of the Diving God (FIG. 11A) and a deep, outcurving-rim pedestal-base vase with red wash exterior (FIG. 12).

The Diving God bowl and related fragments from within stair-core and surface areas over and near the stair (FIG. 11B, C) are known, on the basis of stylistic comparisons with vessels from Lamanai and Tipu, to have been made from the late 15th century through the early Historic period. This evidence shows that the final stair added to Structure 12 is quite likely to be of Terminal Postclassic date, and could have been built in the mid-16th century or later. The vase, as well as two seated burials placed just below the platform surface near the building's center, clearly postdate abandonment of Structure 12, and may therefore be Terminal Postclassic or Historic, a date consonant with the surface treatment of the vessel.

Unfortunately, the judgment that the burials are approximately contemporaneous with the vessel rests on stratigraphy alone, since neither was accompanied by ceramics or other solid chronological diagnostics. The presence of three large stingray spines with one of the individuals suggests that he enjoyed high rank or status, and some of its appurtenances; this may indicate that some of the complexities of earlier social structure remained to the end of occupation at Marco Gonzalez.

On the basis of nothing more than the size of Structure 12 and the history of the site, it would be a reasonable assumption that the Late Postclassic community consisted of more than one family. It is likely that some buildings built in the 13th century continued in use, or experienced reoccupation, during the Late Postclassic, but no midden data recovered thus far support this assumption. There is moderately convincing evidence that the post-1300 lull in

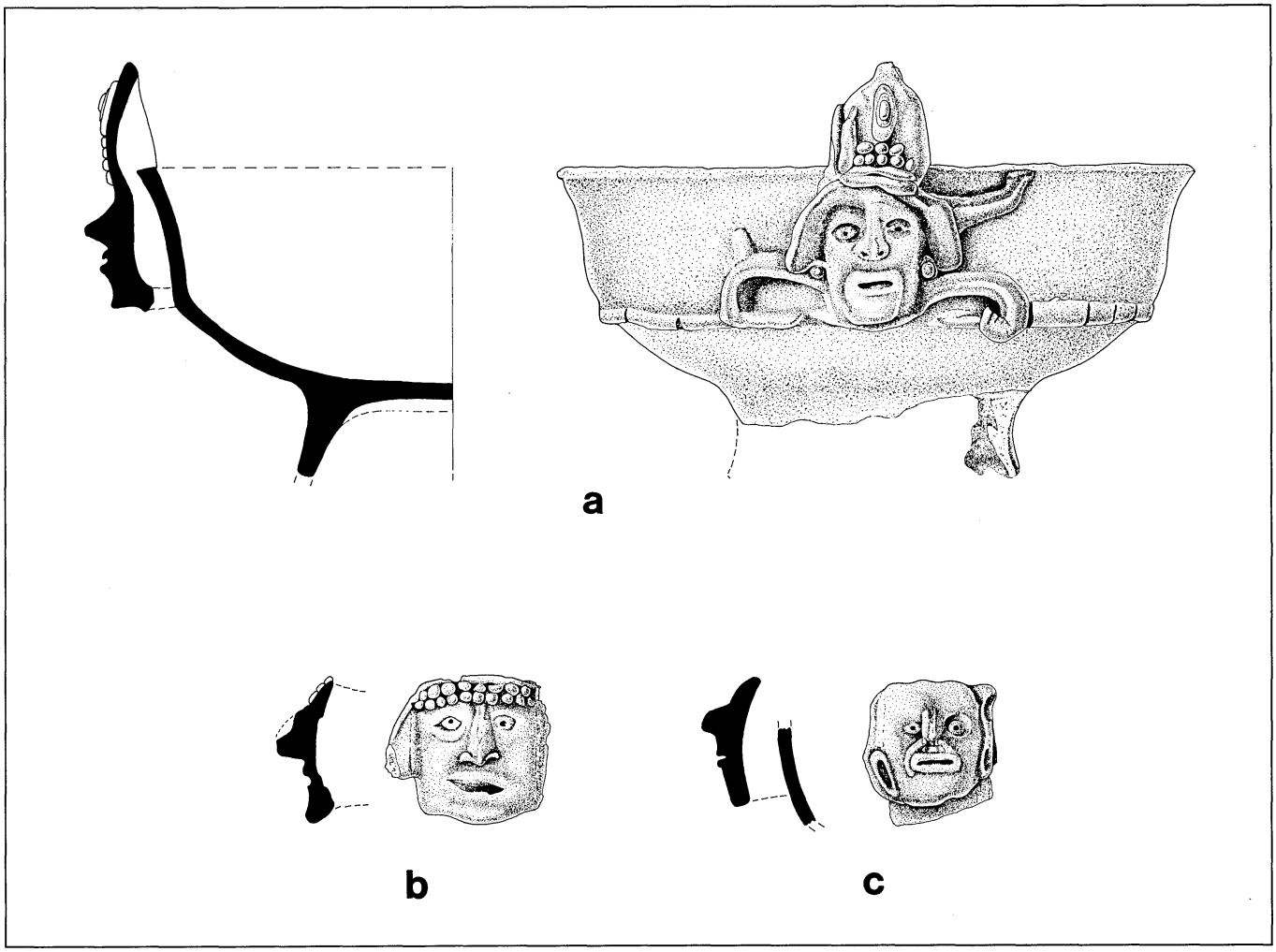


Figure 11. A) Diving God bowl from Structure 12, Cache 1; height 17.3 cm. B) Face from vessel, core of Structure 12, final stair. C) Face from vessel, Structure 12, surface.

construction was succeeded by at least a slight resurgence in building activity in the late 15th century or later. Two partially-excavated low platforms, Structures 46 and 47 (FIG. 4), as well as several cleared but unexcavated buildings, are identical in construction technique to those of 15th-century or later structures at Lamanai. Tulum-related ceramics found beside and atop the platforms may support the 15th-century date (although an earlier range for Tulum-style ceramics has been proposed by Chase and Chase [1985: 14–15]), but we do not yet have a secure basis for temporal placement of the construction.

Together with the offering evidence from Structure 12, the architectural data point to the likelihood that a small population, by now occupying a mangrove-ringed area essentially like that of the site today, survived at Marco Gonzalez into the early years of the 16th century, and perhaps through the time of Spanish entry into the area around 1544.

Summary

The data from Marco Gonzalez contribute far more to our understanding of Maya lowlands prehistory than would be expected of a site so small and so seemingly isolated from the flow of events on the mainland. In addition to the evidence for long-term occupation of the cays on a base that extended beyond marine resource exploitation, the site has yielded a very considerable amount of information on Classic and Terminal Classic/Early Postclassic trade. It is, however, the material of 12th- and 13th-century date that holds the greatest significance for lowland Maya prehistory in general.

At the lowest level, the Marco Gonzalez material rep-

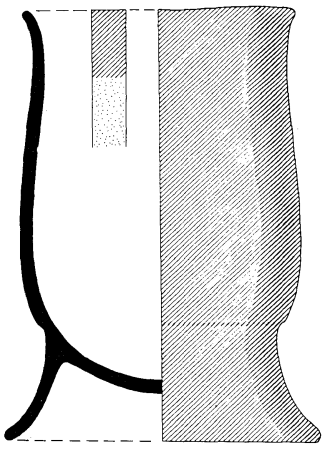


Figure 12. Pedestal-base vase from Structure 12, Cache 3; height 19 cm.

resents a major expansion of the size and decoration inventories for Buk Phase ceramics, previously known only from the principal locale at Lamanai and from scattered pieces elsewhere in Belize. Beyond this, the cay site gives us a sense of the extent of Lamanai's influence in northern Belize, albeit with some large gaps remaining in our comprehension. Marco Gonzalez' strong links in material culture with Lamanai may reflect a political tie that was critical to both communities. The site might have been to Lamanai what Isla Cerritos is proposed to have been for Chichen Itzá: the main port of the ancient center (Andrews et al. 1986). Since so many coastal and inland sites in northern Belize remain to be excavated, however, the positing of such a relationship is premature, and attractive largely for its simplicity.

Most important of all, Marco Gonzalez tells us what, on logical grounds, we have suspected since data on the Postclassic began to come to light at Lamanai. Not only did other communities besides Lamanai survive the apocalypse of the 9th and 10th centuries, but Marco Gonzalez, and probably other settlements as well, shared with the major mainland center a period of great richness and development between about A.C. 1150 and 1300. When the initial excavations are extended to full examination of the site we shall surely come to understand even more fully the events of the Middle Postclassic, and to see them as part of the illumination now being cast on lowland Maya life during the centuries once thought to have been little more than a great void into which the magnificent structure of Classic society had toppled.

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