

EARLY MIDDLE FORMATIVE OCCUPATION IN THE CENTRAL MAYA LOWLANDS: RECENT EVIDENCE FROM CAHAL PECH, BELIZE.

Jaime Awe,¹ Cassandra Bill,² Mark Campbell,³ David Cheetham⁴

(1) Institute of Archaeology, (2) Tulane University, U.S.A., (3) University of Toronto, Canada, (4) Trent University (Canada).

Introduction

After more than half a century of intensive archaeological research the early Middle Formative (or Middle Preclassic) period (1000-600 B.C.) continues to be one of the most enigmatic eras in the study of Lowland Maya prehistory. While several factors contribute to this situation, the primary cause for this obscurity lies in the fact that few sites have produced either contextual or stratigraphic evidence of occupation during this phase (Rice 1976; Andrews 1988). Consequently, any new site with evidence of Middle Formative occupation can contribute substantially to our limited knowledge of this pioneering stage of the Lowland Maya. This paper introduces one such site, Cahal Pech, where recent investigations have uncovered a stratigraphic sequence that tentatively spans the early Middle Formative to the Late Classic period. It provides a preliminary description of the site's early Middle Formative configuration and briefly discusses its possible regional affiliation.

Site Description

Cahal Pech is a medium-size Maya center located in the central Belize Valley region of western Belize (Fig.1). The site core consists of approximately 34 Classic period structures compacted on an acropolis (Fig.2) overlooking San Ignacio Town and the Macal branch of the Belize River. Most of the mounds within the core are located around seven plazas and include tall non-domestic structures and several range-type buildings. The central precinct also contains six plain stelae, one uncarved altar, two ballcourts and possibly a sweathouse (Awe & Campbell, 1988).

Settlement survey in the periphery has recorded and detected a large number of patio groups of varying types and sizes, a causeway, two reservoirs and a large creek that is presently dry. The settlement pattern tentatively displays a concentration of mounds within the vicinity of the reservoirs and creek, but with a marked bias towards locations on the high ridges to the south and southwest of the site core (Awe & Campbell n.d.).

Investigations

Prior to our study several individuals had conducted limited and sporadic research at Cahal Pech. Unfortunately, most of these investigations were either never published or were very brief and descriptive (e.g. Satterthwaite, 1951; Willey *et al.*, 1965). During the 1970's and 1980's several structures at the site were partially destroyed by looters. In an effort to halt these activities the senior author, with the support of the Belize Tourism Industry Association, The Belize Department of Archaeology, and the financial sponsorship of Trent University and the Canadian Commission for Unesco, organized the first major program of investigations at Cahal Pech.

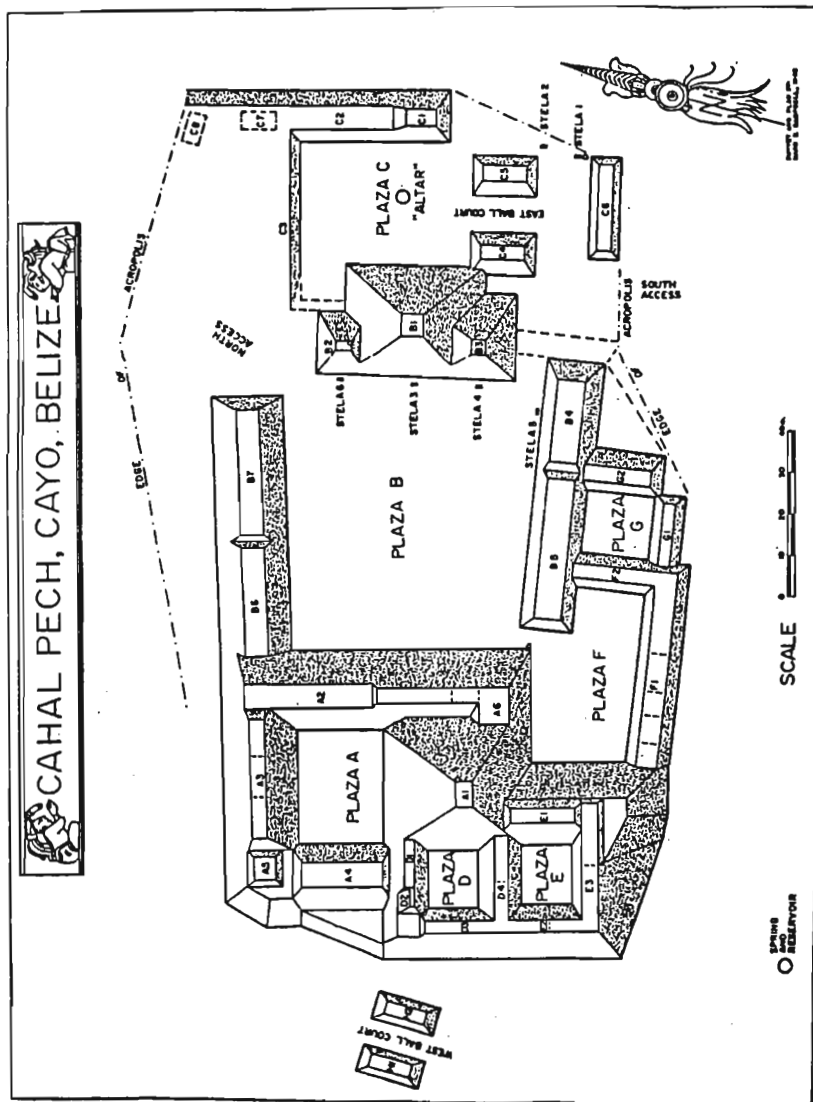


Fig. 2. Rectified plan of the site core at Cahal Pech, Belize

Since the sample of early Middle Formative (1000-600 B.C.) sites in the Central Maya Lowlands "is pitifully small" (Willey, 1981, 414) we decided that future investigations would concentrate on this aspect of the site's prehistory. On the basis

of comparative cross-dating, the second (1989) season of research has tentatively a) confirmed our previous chronological sequence, b) identified the spatial distribution of Middle Formative loci, and c) has uncovered contextual data, in stratified deposits, dating from the early Middle Formative to the Classic Period (Awe *et al.*, 1990).

The Early Middle Formative at Cahal Pech (1000-600 B.C.)

To date, evidence for early Middle Formative occupation has only been recorded within Plaza B. Contexts dating to this period were discovered underlying levels equivalent to the Mamom and Chicanel spheres, approximately six meters and five meters below the summits of structures B-2 and B-4, respectively. Most of the information provided below, however, comes from a large excavation unit that descended below the plaza level on structure B-4.

Data from these excavations indicate that the early Middle Formative inhabitants lived in small apsidal structures bordered in some areas by one or two tiers of roughly-cut limestone blocks. Inside, the houses appear to have had packed, or poorly plastered limestone floors. Several post-holes and a fragment of pole-impressed plaster suggest that the superstructures were constructed of poles and thatch and the walls consisted of wattle and daub.

The artefact assemblage includes ground and chipped stone implements, as well as pottery and ceramic figurines. While most of the latter display marked affinities to material from the southern and southeastern Maya Highlands, a few specimens resemble figurines from the Nacaste and Palangana phases at San Lorenzo, Tenochtitlan (Coe & Diehl, 1980). The pottery, which has been placed in a new complex designated the Cunil ceramic phase, consists mostly of monochromes, dominated by orange, red and brown slipped types. Flat-base dishes with flaring sides, tecomates and short-necked jars are most prevalent in the form repertoire. Surface decorations include grooving, incising, punctating, and some filleting.

Stylistically the Cunil complex material demonstrates ties with early Jenney Creek types from the Belize Valley (Gifford, 1976), with Swasey/Bladen material from Cuello (Kosakowsky, 1987), and Bolay ceramics from Colha (Valdez, 1987) to the north. A number of tentatively identified northern Belize-like types at Cahal Pech include Ramgoat Red, Consejo Red and Tower Hill Red-on-Cream. Due to the preliminary nature of our analysis it is premature to rule out any relationship with ceramics from the central Peten or Pasion zone sites in Guatemala. Nevertheless, in a recent paper on Lowland Maya ceramics Andrews (1988) argues that pottery from the Xe complex in the Pasion area is distinct from early Middle Formative ceramics from the eastern Belize region of the Central Lowlands. If Andrews' hypothesis is valid, evidence suggesting ties between Cahal Pech and Pasion zone sites may not be present.

Animal remains, and ground stone tools, in the lowest stratigraphic levels suggest that the pioneering inhabitants of Cahal Pech practised a mixed subsistence economy based on foraging and farming. The presence of a relatively large number of fresh water clams (*Nepronaias ortomanni*) and jute (*Pachychilus indiorum* and *P. glaphyrus*) shells indicates some reliance on, and the exploitation of, riverine resources. It is also possible that they collected, and probably planted, macal (*Xanthosoma* spp.) which grows wild and ubiquitously by the banks of the Macal River.

Conclusion

Presently, the ongoing nature of our field research and data analysis prevents us from making conclusive statements regarding the origins, cultural complexity and interregional relations of the early Middle Formative Cahal Pech community. Even at this stage, however, the site is providing another window through which we can view the pioneering processes that preceded the dispersal of precocious Maya villages during the late Middle Formative period. Furthermore, the Cahal Pech data, with its rare stratigraphic sequence, should contribute substantially to our limited early Middle Formative data base, and our understanding of Maya cultural genesis by clarifying several enigmatic questions regarding early Lowland Maya prehistory.

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