

Elites, eccentrics, and empowerment in the Maya area: implications for the interpretation of a peripheral settlement cluster near Cahal Pech, Cayo District, Belize

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Introduction

The importance of material culture as an active participant in the creation and maintenance of socio-political relationships has long been recognised in anthropology (e.g. Geertz 1971, 1973, 1983; Turner 1985), and more recently within archaeology itself (e.g. Hodder 1982a, 1982b, 1982c, 1983, 1986). Researchers studying the ancient Maya are especially aware of the dynamic role played by material culture in the negotiation of these relationships (e.g. Fash 1988; Freidel and Schele 1988; Schele and Miller 1986; Schele and Freidel 1990). Whether it be architecture (e.g. Ashmore 1989, 1992; Coe 1956; Laporte and Fialko 1990; Schele 1990; Vogt 1983: 113-114), monuments (e.g. Coggins 1990; Marcus 1974, 1976), or other transportable components of the artefact assemblage (e.g. Clarke 1987; Freidel 1990; Iannone 1992a), it is generally understood that material culture was an active force within Maya society.

Among the most fascinating artefacts recovered in the Maya area are the eccentric lithics (Fig. 1). These chipped stone items were major components of the Maya elite material culture assemblage, and were almost always deposited in dedicatory caches, and to a lesser extent in elite burials, within the ceremonial confines of the larger Maya centres (Iannone 1992a: 112). They are thought to have been part of an ancestor cult which linked the ruling elite to the gods, thus reaffirming the former's privileged position in the Maya universe (Iannone 1992a: 250, 254). This paper focuses on the eccentric lithics recovered from the Tzinic group, a major settlement cluster located in the periphery of the larger site of Cahal Pech (Conlon 1992, Ph.D dissertation in progress; Conlon and Awe 1991). This seemingly uncharacteristic peripheral context demands explanation. We will argue that when the eccentrics are considered alongside other elite-oriented aspects present at the group in question, the situation corresponds well with a peripheral elite defining and solidifying its position in the socio-political hierarchy through the adoption of the site core's most effective material culture expressions. It will also be suggested that the elite from the site core condoned the use of these items, thus implying that a very strong relationship existed between the peripherally located elite at Tzinic and the more established ruling class inhabiting the site core of Cahal Pech.

The Tzinic Group at Cahal Pech

The Tzinic group, and the larger centre of Cahal Pech, are located in the Belize Valley (Fig. 2), an area containing dense ancient Maya settlement (Fig. 3). Intensive excavations in the site core of Cahal Pech (Fig. 4) began in 1988 and continued through the 1991 field season (Awe and Campbell 1988; Awe et al. 1990; Awe and Campbell 1991, 1992). In conjunction with this work investigations were also initiated in the periphery of the site (Awe et al. 1990: 6-11; Awe 1992; Awe et al. 1992a, 1992b; Conlon 1992; Conlon and Awe 1991; Goldsmith 1992; Powis 1992). The Tzinic group (Fig. 5) was excavated in 1990 and 1991 as part of this peripheral study (Conlon and Awe 1991; Conlon 1992, Ph.D dissertation in progress).

Located approximately 450 m south of the Cahal Pech site core, the Tzinic group has been classified as a major settlement cluster (Conlon 1992: 71) consisting of a courtyard surrounded by two pyramidal and three 'range-type' structures (Structures 1-5). Structure 1, enclosing the eastern portion of the plaza, is a temple rising 8.6 m above the plaza floor, although prior to the collapse of its vaulted

superstructure it probably measured closer to 10 m in height (Conlon 1992: 73). This is the largest architectural feature in the group. Structure 2, defining the southern boundary of the plaza, is also a temple structure. Being slightly smaller than Structure 1, it rises 5.6 m above the plaza surface. The remaining three architectural features are lying mounds. Structure 3, approximately 5 metres square, is located in the southwest corner of the courtyard, and has been interpreted as a possible kitchen facility (Conlon and Awe 1991). Structure 4 is situated in the western portion of the plaza. This mound rises only 1 m above the plaza floor, and is only 9.5 m in length. Finally, to the north of the plaza, Structure 5 occurs, being 21 m long and rising 1 m above the plaza surface. A subsidiary settlement cluster, consisting of two small 'housemounds' (Structures 6 and 7), also exists to the south of the main plaza (see Fig. 4). A similar housemound grouping, formed by Structures 8 and 9, also occurs 35 m to the southwest of Structure 1 (Conlon 1992: 72).

Excavations at Tzanic have allowed for a temporal sequence of group development to be constructed. This sequence is described in Conlon (1992: 76-81), and is summarised here. The evidence suggests that the Tzanic group was initially occupied during the Late Middle Formative period (600 B.C.-300 B.C.). The earliest architectural feature at the group is Structure 6, which around 400 B.C. consisted of a small plaster platform rising 8 to 10 cm above bedrock. It has been suggested, however, that the earliest construction phases associated with Structures 1 and 2 may also date to this time period or earlier, although looting activity prevented excavation of the deepest central portions of these structures. Thus this cannot be confirmed (Conlon 1992: 76).

During the Late Formative period (300 B.C.-100 B.C.) construction focused on Structures 1 and 2. The earliest excavated phases of construction, forming raised plaster platforms rising approximately 30 to 40 cm above the bedrock, took place during the early part of this period. Subsequently, near the end of the Late Formative, Structures 1 and 2 were raised again. Structure 1 gained an additional 80 cm in height. In contrast, construction at Structure 2 was considerably more ambitious, with the final product being a 3.9 m high platform.

The early part of the Protoclassic period (100 B.C.-A.D. 300) saw the initial construction of Structure 5, which was eventually raised 35 cm above its associated plaza floor by about A.D. 100. Other than this, little construction appears to have occurred at Tzanic, with the exception of floor refurbishing and minor modifications to stairs and platforms.

Similarly, little activity is evident during the Early Classic period (A.D. 300-600). Although some minor modifications to Structures 5 and 6 may be attributable to this period, all other constructional activity seems to have ceased. However, this cessation in activity may be more apparent than real, resulting from the continued use of Late Formative ceramics into the established Early Classic time period (Awe pers. comm. 1991; Cheetham 1992: 4; Conlon 1992: 80-81), thus making it difficult to isolate Early Classic occupation because of a reliance on the presence of 'Early Classic' ceramic types.

The Late Classic period (A.D. 600-900) at Tzanic was a time of constructional elaboration. Structure 1 was raised almost to the level of Structure 2, reaching 5.4 m in height by A.D. 700. Around A.D. 800 further platform elaborations were conducted on Structure 1, and a vaulted superstructure was constructed. As a result, Structure 1 became the highest architectural feature at the site, being over 10 m in height. Little construction focused on Structure 2, although an elaborate crypt interment occurred at this time, or slightly earlier, and a stela was erected at the base of the structure (see below). Structures 5 and 6 also exhibit some platform construction. The courtyard obtained its final form with the extension of the plaza westward, where two new structures (3 and 4) were constructed.

The eccentrics from the Tzanic group

The eccentrics from Tzanic, numbering fifteen in total (see Fig. 1), were recovered during the 1991 season (Conlon 1992; Iannone 1992b). Consisting of four chert and eleven obsidian examples, this assemblage unfortunately comes from a disturbed context. Recovered from the surface deposit of the

north face of Structure 2, it seems likely that the objects originate from a dedicatory constructional cache disrupted by root action (Iannone 1992b: 93), or careless looters (Conlon 1992: 74; Conlon and Awe 1991: 12). An analysis of these items (Iannone 1992b) indicates that the full range of lithic reduction strategies was employed, from hard hammer percussion, to indirect percussion in the formation of notches, to finer pressure flaking.

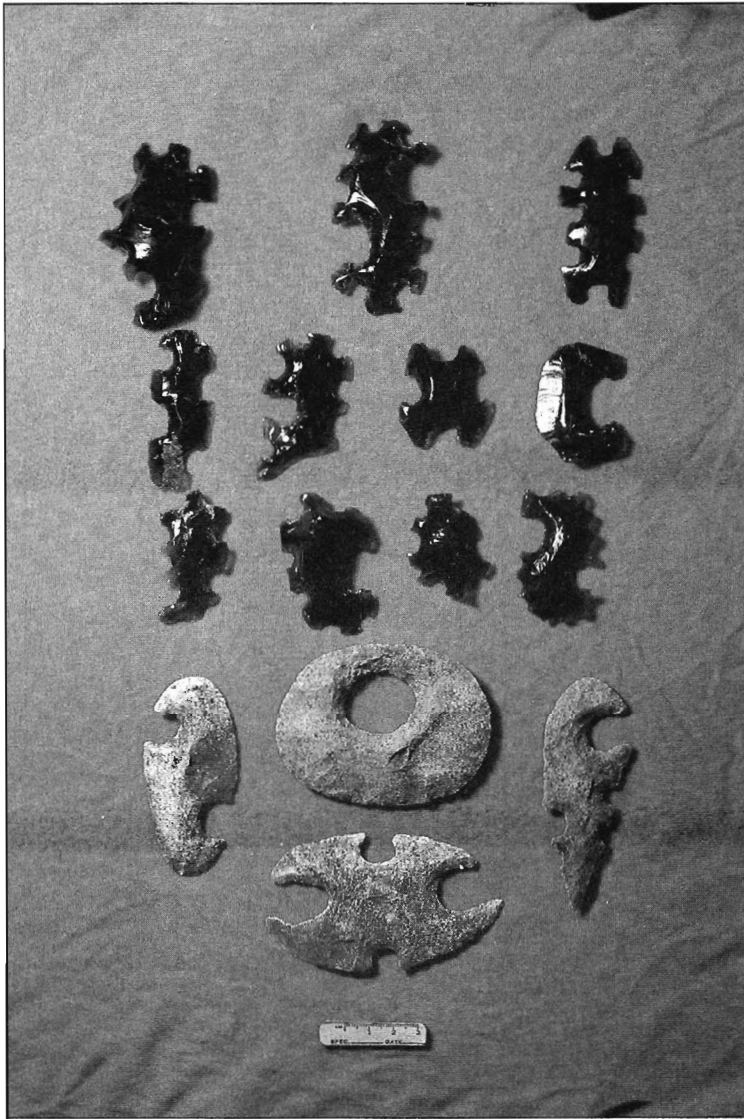


Fig. 1 Eccentric lithics from the Tzinc group, Cahal Pech, Belize

However, not all examples exhibit all these production features. The assemblage is quite variable, ranging from simple notched blade cores through to finely pressure-flaked items. The raw material employed in production is similarly variable. Indications are that the cherts, and probably some of the obsidians, were manufactured from raw cores. The remaining obsidian items all appear to have been produced from exhausted blade cores.

A subsidiary component of the formal analysis of the Tzinc eccentrics consisted of an exhaustive

survey of eccentric morphological forms for the Maya area as a whole. The goal of this exploration was to assess the relationship between the forms recovered at Tzinic and those found throughout the rest of the Maya area. As a result of this investigation it was determined that the Tzinic assemblage includes eccentrics morphologically similar to those found at various Maya sites (Fig. 6). It can therefore be concluded that Tzinic, and by association Cahal Pech, were active participants in the Lowland Maya interaction sphere (Iannone 1992b: 112).

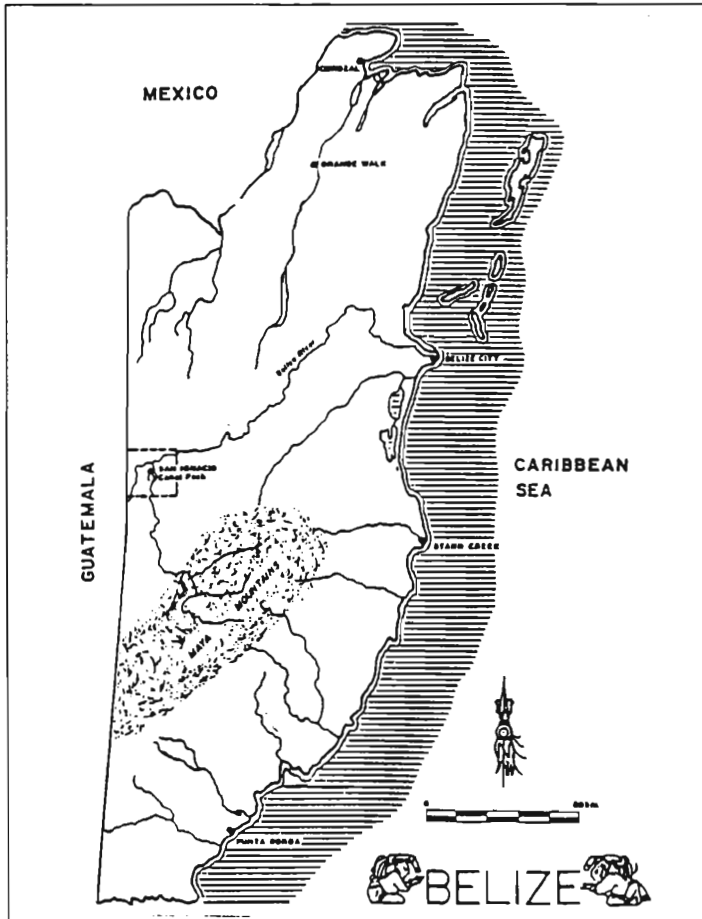


Fig. 2 Map of Belize showing the location of Cahal Pech (after Awe and Campbell 1992: iii)

Eccentrics, elites, and empowerment among the Maya

Eccentric lithic artefacts have long fascinated both Mayanists and the general public alike. However, until recently no systematic exploration of these items had been undertaken. Many researchers have postulated possible functions for these artefacts (see Iannone 1992a: 9-12). Unfortunately, although the majority of these interpretations argue for the ceremonial significance of eccentric lithics, disagreement exists concerning the precise ceremonial role. The shortcoming of these hypotheses are that few are grounded in a solid theoretical and methodological framework (Iannone 1992a: 13). A recent investigation by one of the authors has attempted to rectify this situation (Iannone 1992a). The results of the analysis will now be summarised in order to provide a setting within which the Tzinic

eccentrics can be interpreted.

The following are the major points generated by the analysis (Iannone 1992a: 252-253): (1) a variety of morphological forms occur within the overall eccentric assemblage, although a degree of standardisation still exists; (2) eccentrics have been recovered from contexts dating from the latter part of the Late Formative (ca. 150-250 A.D.) to the Mayapan dominated portion of the late Postclassic (ca. 1221-1441 A.D.), although they were most consistently in use during the Classic period (250/300-900 A.D.); (3) formalization in the use of eccentrics began around the late 4th/early 5th century A.D.; (4) eccentric production and uses concentrated in the Maya lowlands, although they are found throughout the Maya area; (5) both the temporal and spatial distributions suggest peer-polity interaction;

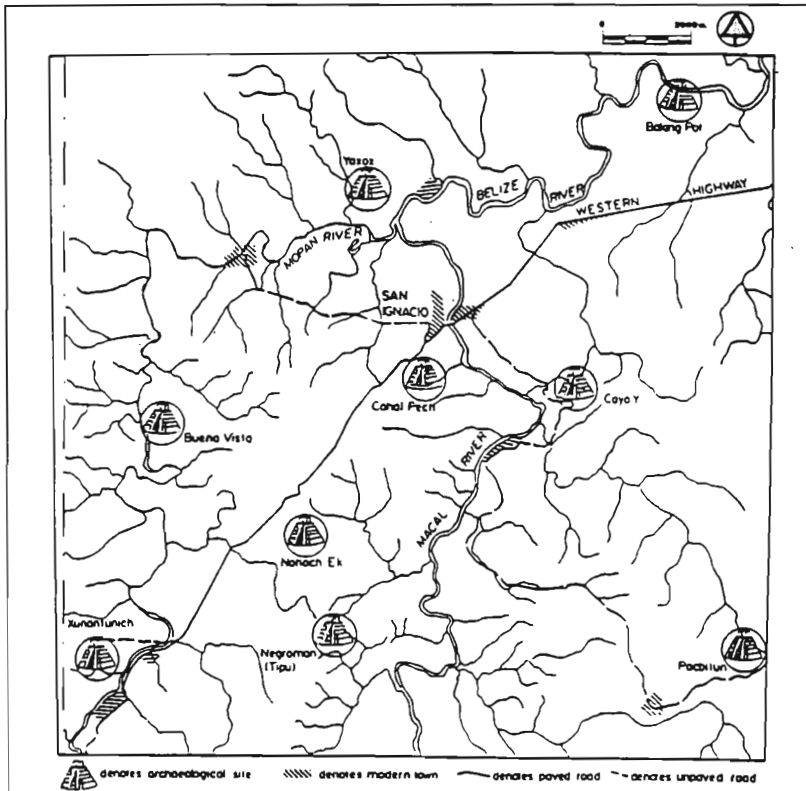


Fig. 3 Archaeological sites in the Macal-Mopan rivers region of Cayo, Belize (after Awe and Campbell 1992: iv)

(6) eccentrics are almost always deposited as offerings, in association with stelae, altars, and temples, within the ceremonial confines of the larger Maya sites; (7) the artefacts found in association with eccentrics are mainly other lithics, suggesting the presence of a 'Lowland Maya Lithic Ceremonial Complex'; (8) eccentrics are usually recovered in groups, although no set number recurs often enough to be deemed significant; (9) the data point towards autochthonous development of eccentrics within the Maya lowlands, with roots going back to the 'concept' of ceremonial chipped stone beginning with the stemmed macroblade (see also Gibson 1989; Iannone 1992c); (10) the overall eccentric assemblage is quite variable with regard to raw material, origin and form, manufacturing techniques employed, locus of manufacture, and the quality and size of the final product; (11) the raw materials employed in eccentric production, chert and obsidian, were believed by the Maya to have had celestial origins; (12) eccentrics were probably produced by craft specialists; (13) the elite of Lowland Maya society are

thought to have controlled both the production and distribution of eccentrics; (14) this control over production and consumption acted to infuse additional ideological power into the eccentrics; (15) few actual depictions of eccentrics exist in ancient Maya art and iconography; (16) when eccentrics are depicted in plastic and graphic media they are almost always in association with deities.

Maya eccentric lithics belonged to an ideologically-oriented system which included temples, altars, and stelae monuments (Iannone 1992a: 253). The eccentrics appear to be symbolic depictions of both gods and ancestors, thus representing the ruler's bloodline. Similarly, stelae and their associated altars are known to be memorials to rulers, or in rare instances other members of the Maya elite (Proskouriakoff 1960; see also Freidel and Schele 1988: 547; Hammond 1991: 253-254; Houston 1992: 66). It is also now accepted that temples were the homes of the ancestors and spirits, and were thus places of ancestor worship (Adams 1970: 490-492; Coe 1956; Fash 1988: 164; Freidel and Schele 1989: 233; Schele and Freidel 1990: 121; Vogt 1983: 113-114; Van Zantwijk 1981: 71).

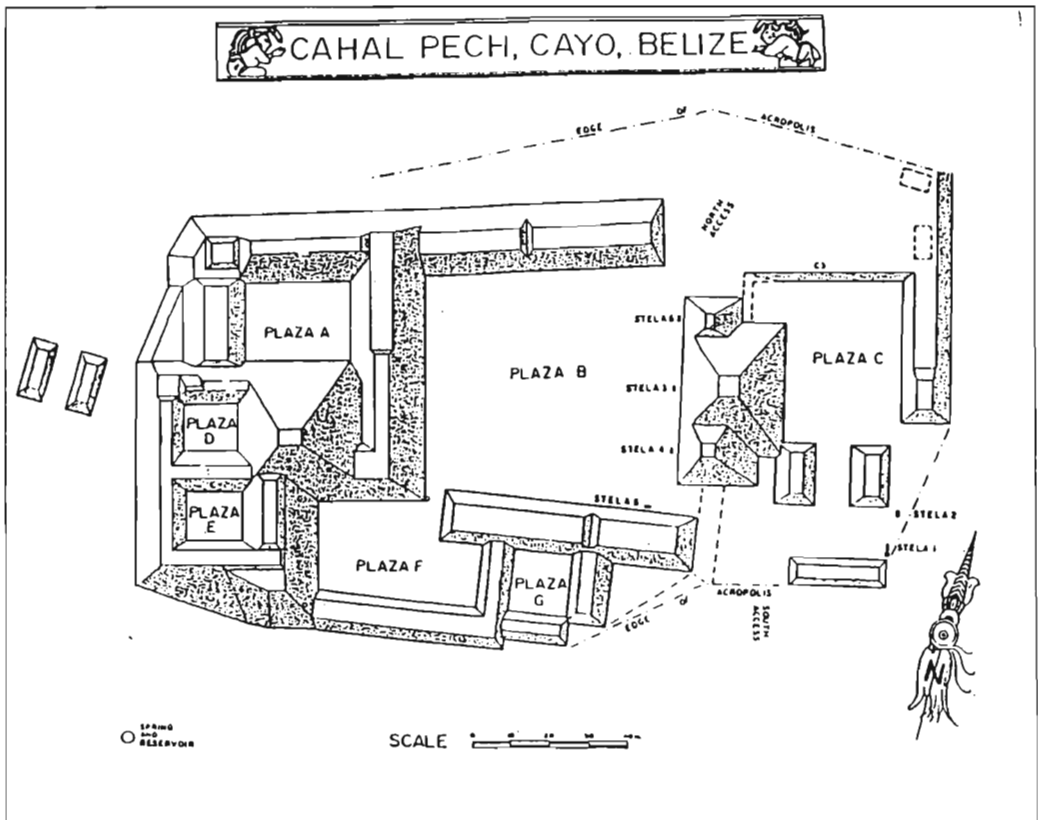


Fig. 4 Rectified plan of the site core at Cahal Pech, Belize (after Awe and Campbell 1992: v)

In sum, these elements of Maya material culture seem to relate to an ancestor cult which, having foundations in all levels of Lowland Maya society (e.g. Hammond 1982: 165-166), was employed by the Maya elite to justify and reaffirm their own position in the socio-political hierarchy (Iannone 1992a: 253-254). That both the stelae and eccentric complexes coincides with, and in reality are definitive aspects of, the Classic period is also intriguing. Their appearance seems to come with what some researchers have called an ideological shift (Freidel 1981; Freidel and Schele 1988: 549; Miller 1986), which promoted Maya rulers to god-like status. This shift is seen as an effort, on behalf of the ruling elite, to justify and solidify their position as the ruling class (Freidel and Schele 1988; Marcus 1974;

Schele and Miller 1986: 105-107).

According to Schele and Miller (1986: 107), the Maya used symbols and myth to promote the idea that “differential social ranking and a ruling elite...[were]...the natural order of existence ordained by the gods”. Similarly, Marcus (1974: 83-84) has argued that symbols and myth may have been employed as ‘propaganda’ in order to persuade the other members of society to accept the elite’s position in the ruling hierarchy. Schele and Miller (1986:109) conclude that the Maya were reacting to a “profound social crisis”, and that their response was more ideologically oriented than economic. It has been argued that the transformation of a mere human to a king became ritualised by the Early Classic (Schele and Miller 1986: 109), implying that material culture symbols such as eccentrics, temples, altars, and stelae were manipulated in a ritualised fashion during this process of transformation. Thus, these items of material culture were active participants in the negotiation of socio-political relationships among the ancient Maya.

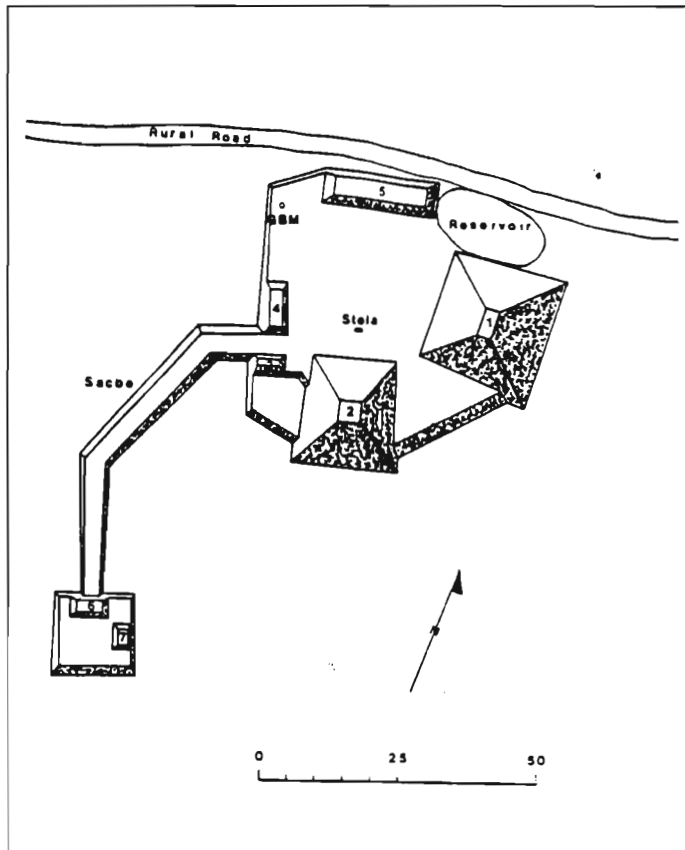


Fig. 5 Rectified plan of the Tzinc Group, Cahal Pech, Belize (after Conlon 1992: 70)

Other Tzinc material culture: adding to the argument

Another component of the Tzinc material culture assemblage reaffirms the aforementioned argument. As well as eccentrics, the Tzinc group also contained a stela (Conlon 1992: 74; Conlon and Awe 1991). Located in front of Structure 2, this broken monument may have originally been carved (Conlon and Awe 1991). This is another instance where a specific form of material culture, usually associated with the ceremonial confines of larger site cores, occurs at Tzinc. The context of the stela, in front of a temple

structure, fits the overall Maya lowland pattern. In addition, the eccentrics were also found in association with this temple structure. Excavations within the temple revealed the presence of an elaborate crypt which was placed within the temple summit sometime around A.D. 500-600 (Conlon and Awe 1991), a fact which reflects the idea of temples and ancestor worship discussed previously. The stela is also thought to have been erected at this time. Thus, the pan-lowland syntagmatic relationship between temples, stelae, and eccentrics manifests itself at Tzinic. It is apparent that the Tzinic elite employed these symbols in the proper manner. Thus, they must have had a knowledge of these items, their relationships to each other, and the 'power' inherent in the ancestor cult that they represented. It is also worth noting that the appearance of this ideological triad corresponds with a time of great architectural elaboration at Tzinic (see above).

Discussion

The occurrence of eccentric lithics within the confines of a peripheral group, such as Tzinic, demands explanation, considering the overwhelming pattern of their recovery from the ceremonial sectors of large Maya sites. However, upon consideration, their presence in the Tzinic context is not entirely out of place given the dynamics of ancient Maya socio-political relationships. It is generally believed that ritual items, such as eccentrics, were used to link elites at different centres (Gibson 1989: 117; see also Shafer and Hester 1983: 538). Currently, the most accepted model for describing the nature of these Maya elite relationships is one of peer-polity interaction (e.g. Freidel 1986; Sabloff 1986; see also Renfrew 1986).

Given the scenario outlined in this paper, certain aspects of the peer-polity model become important. For example, Renfrew (1986: 7-8) notes that, concomitant with the development of peer polities, there also appear "assemblages of specific and special artefacts which may be associated with high status in the society in question; and customs....indicative of ritual practices reflecting and perhaps reinforcing the social organisation". This definitely seems to be the case with eccentrics, which are high status items, are employed during rituals, and are arguably manipulated for social and political ends (Iannone 1992a). Renfrew (1986: 7-8) also suggests that "the observed feature will not be attributable to a single locus of innovation....but, so far as the chronological means allow, will be seen to develop within several different polities in the region at about the same time". This expectation is again met with reference to eccentrics, as no clear place of origin can be isolated within the Maya lowlands, although northern Belize may be the best candidate (see Gibson 1989; Iannone 1992a: 129-153, 1992c). In addition, formalised use of eccentrics begins across the Maya lowlands at roughly the same time, the late 4th to early 5th century AD (Iannone 1992a: 83, 129, 1992c). Thus we believe that a strong argument can be made for the use of eccentrics within peer-polity interaction. This is supported by the recovery of identical, complex morphological forms from far-flung Lowland Maya sites (Coe 1959, Tables 1 and 2; Iannone 1992a: 6, 181).

Freidel (1986: 93), in a recent argument concerning the nature of ancient Maya warfare, postulated that "Maya religion, and political ideology provided a *charter* for the creation of peer polities", and that "...the advent of a new polity was heralded by the same *charter* of power found in all of the other polities" (emphasis ours). It can therefore be argued, following Freidel, that eccentrics were part of this *charter* of power. Elite interaction, and the manipulation of this charter of power were major means by which burgeoning elites obtained status, and established elites consolidated status. We would suggest, therefore, that as components of this *charter* of power investment, eccentrics, and the knowledge of their production and proper usage, would be tightly controlled by the ancient Maya elite. Otherwise, such artefacts would not have been effective in the development and maintenance of socio-political status within the peer-polity system (e.g. Brumfiel and Earle 1987; Gero 1989; Peregrine 1991).

In summary, it is likely that: (a) the Tzinic elite were attempting to solidify their socio-political position within the region by employing the most effective elite material culture expressions, or in other

words, the *charter*, suggested by Freidel; (b) this material was employed during a time of obvious prosperity at Tzinic, as indicated by the concomitant programme of architectural modifications and elaborations; (c) a full understanding of the use of eccentrics and other components of the *charter* existed, as is attested by the association of a stela, with eccentrics, and a temple structure, and the presence of morphologically complex eccentric forms identical to those recovered from far-flung Maya sites;

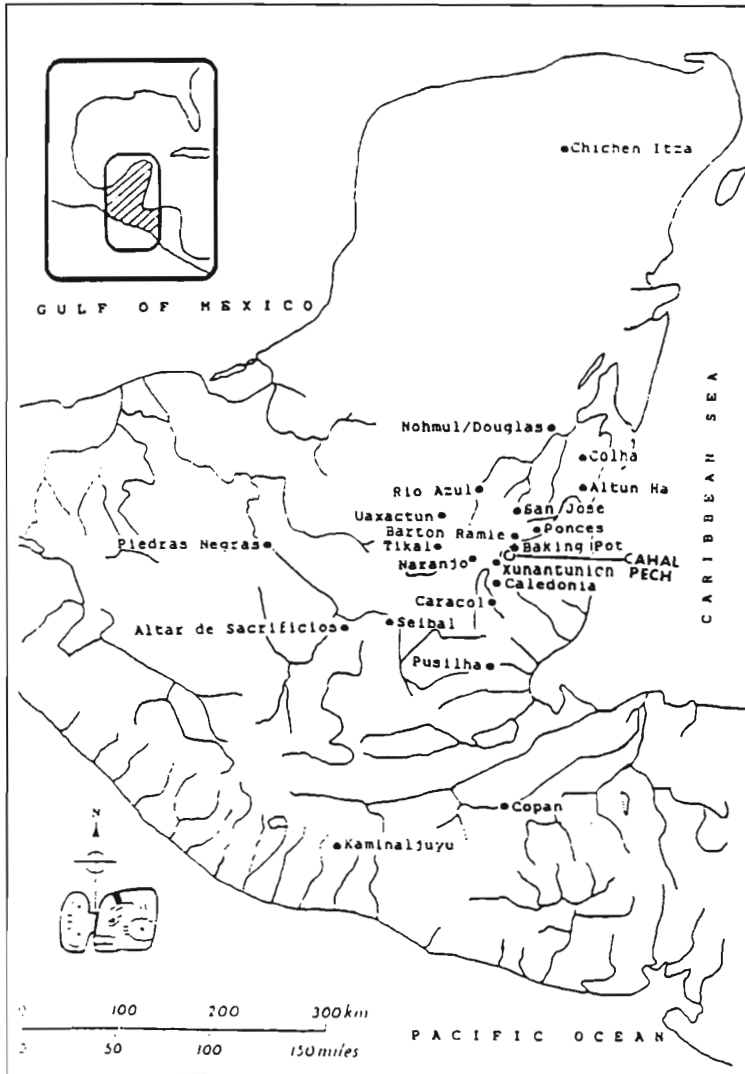


Fig. 6 Archaeological sites with at least one eccentric form similar to those recovered from the Tzinic Group at Cahal Pech (after Iannone 1992: 113)

(d) through the utilisation of these symbols the elite at Tzinic were tapping into a very powerful ancestor cult, and where thus striving to distance themselves from the lesser members of the surrounding population by elevating their bloodline past that of mere 'economic elite' to the higher, and possibly more stable, level of 'ideological elite'; (e) due to the tight control over who had the knowledge of, access to, and right to employ, such highly charged items, the ruling elite at Cahal Pech, and possibly other elites within the Belize Valley, must have condoned the use of these items by the residents of Tzinic.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the eccentrics from the Tzinic group offer a good example of the dynamic and active role played by material culture in the definition and solidification of socio-political relationships. These highly charged elements of the Maya material culture assemblage, along with others, were employed by the Maya elite to reaffirm their position in the ruling hierarchy. The tight control over the production, redistribution, and use of these items acted to maintain them within the hierarchical boundaries of ruling elite interaction, and the concrete boundaries of the ceremonial precincts of larger Maya sites. That the Tzinic elite, located in the periphery of the larger site of Cahal Pech, were able to gain access to these material symbols, and to the knowledge to employ them in a proper manner, suggests that a close relationship existed between the Tzinic residents and the ruling elite of Cahal Pech. However, this leaves open the question of the nature of this relationship. How did the people of Tzinic relate to the larger site of Cahal Pech, to the surrounding population, and to the rest of the elite in the Belize Valley? Such questions cannot be answered here, although they are the topic of an investigation by one of the authors (Conlon, Ph.D. dissertation in progress). Suffice to say, the eccentrics are a key to the fuller understanding of Tzinic's position in the socio-political hierarchy within the Belize Valley.

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