

# CLASSIC MAYA PROVINCIAL POLITICS

Xunantunich and Its  
Hinterlands



Edited by  
Lisa J. LeCount and Jason Yaeger

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Dedicated to Wendy Ashmore and Richard M. Leventhal

In memory of Jennifer J. Ehret and Jon C. VandenBosch



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## Preface

THIS VOLUME IS THE PRODUCT OF A DECADE of field research by dozens of people who worked under the umbrella of the Xunantunich Archaeological Project (XAP) and the Xunantunich Settlement Survey (XSS). As detailed in chapter 1, these investigations were designed to understand the rise and fall of the Classic Maya center of Xunantunich and the changing organization of the households and communities that comprised Xunantunich's hinterlands. Our contributors present new data relevant to these issues, but they focus more closely on the political organization of Xunantunich and its hinterlands, with the larger goal of understanding interregional political dynamics in Maya civilization during the Late and Terminal Classic periods (AD 600–1000).

The contributions in this volume represent the culmination of many close collaborative relationships. Most of the contributors were XAP and XSS project members who worked together closely in the field and lab and, in many instances, at the same universities. Although we each established our own research agendas and brought distinct theoretical perspectives and analytic methods to our studies, we were united by the project's overarching research goals and its methodologies, typologies, and conventions. As a result, there was a high degree of complementarity among our diverse investigations and a high level of comparability in the data we collected. The end product is a complex, multiscalar dataset derived from excavation, survey, and artifact and ecofact analyses at Xunantunich, nearby minor centers, and hinterland households and settlements. These data allow us to link ancient people and places together into a dynamic political landscape, permitting more detailed and nuanced understandings of Xunantunich and its hinterlands than would be possible from any one study alone.

This volume has its origins in a 2003 symposium at the annual meeting of the Society for American Archaeology in Milwaukee. The last XAP field season was 1998, and by 2003, project members who were graduate

students during the project were either writing their dissertations or had recently finished them. The time seemed auspicious to synthesize our diverse datasets with the larger goal of evaluating models of the changing political organization of Xunantunich and its hinterland settlements that could only be fully addressed with multiple datasets and at multiple scales.

The contributors to the 2003 symposium have amplified and edited their papers, and we solicited additional chapters (chapters 1, 3, 5, and 10) to address topics pertinent to the volume's larger questions. We also added a concluding chapter that synthesizes the data presented in the volume and evaluates the models and ideas presented in chapter 2. It is our hope that this volume will advance ongoing debates about how Classic Maya polities were organized and the relationships that existed between broader interregional political processes and social and political dynamics internal to individual polities.

# CLASSIC MAYA PROVINCIAL POLITICS



# The Xunantunich Archaeological Project, 1991–1997

**RICHARD M. LEVENTHAL, WENDY ASHMORE,  
LISA J. LECOUNT, AND JASON YAEGER**

THE FIRST ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH at Xunantunich occurred more than a century ago, when Thomas Gann excavated at the site in the 1890s (Gann 1894–95). Despite this early start, subsequent investigations were infrequent and short, and our understanding of the site advanced slowly. In 1965, William R. Bullard could summarize the state of knowledge of Xunantunich, or Benque Viejo as it was then called, in fewer than two pages (Willey et al. 1965: 315–16). Bullard observed that “although Benque Viejo by no means matches in size and amount of construction the large ceremonial centers further west in the Guatemalan Department of Peten, its principal building, A-6, a large palace on a high substructure . . . is one of the most imposing structures in the southern Maya lowlands” (1965:315). On the opposite page, black-and-white photos of Str. A-6 and other monumental buildings in Group A corroborate this assertion.

Over the last half-century, many Mayanists have considered the Belize Valley region an important laboratory for addressing key questions regarding Maya civilization. Gordon Willey and his colleagues (1965) recognized the strategic role of the Belize River as a critical ancient trade route between the Caribbean Sea and the large sites of the central Peten lowlands. The Belize Valley’s location on the periphery of the central Peten zone raises additional questions. Were peripheral polities organized differently from those to the west? What was their relationship to larger centers like Tikal? Euan MacKie (1961) argued that the data from Xunantunich might help us understand the Classic Maya collapse. What external and internal pressures led to the collapse of Classic Maya civilization? Did some sites outlive others as centers of power, and if so, why? Despite Xunantunich’s research potential and its impressive monumental

buildings, academic interest and tourist visitation were so sporadic and short-lived throughout most of the twentieth century that Group B was the scene of looting in the summer of 1979 (Pendergast and Graham 1981). The pace of archaeological research and our understanding of the site and its hinterlands would change dramatically beginning in 1991.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, tourism was becoming a focus of economic development in Central America, and the nations that today occupy the ancient Maya world recognized the power of Maya culture, past and present, to draw tourists to “El Mundo Maya,” as the region came to be called. At this time, the government of Belize sought to develop tourist attractions, with financial assistance from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Xunantunich, easily accessible and located on the modern road to Tikal, was targeted for development (see fig. 1.1). Recognizing that the growth of tourism at Xunantunich would have adverse effects on the site’s conservation, Belize’s Ministry of Tourism and the Environment and Department of Archaeology advocated for a development approach that combined scientific investigation, archaeological conservation, and architectural consolidation. In 1991, Acting Commissioner of Archaeology John Morris extended an invitation to Richard Leventhal to direct those efforts.

The result was the Xunantunich Archaeological Project (XAP), a multidisciplinary research and conservation program that began with a pilot season in the summer of 1991 and continued with annual spring field seasons through 1997. Although XAP consolidation efforts focused on the Xunantunich site center, Leventhal recognized that understanding ancient Xunantunich required studying the polity as a whole. He invited Wendy Ashmore to codirect the project and develop the Xunantunich Settlement Survey (XSS) to study the polity’s hinterlands.

## Previous Research at Xunantunich

When Leventhal and Ashmore began the project, they knew that Xunantunich had a significant occupation in the Late and Terminal Classic periods, and that the polity’s rulers carved monuments proclaiming their power in the first half of the ninth century, the center apparently surviving into the late ninth or tenth centuries during the so-called Maya collapse. This knowledge derived from a long history of archaeological research at

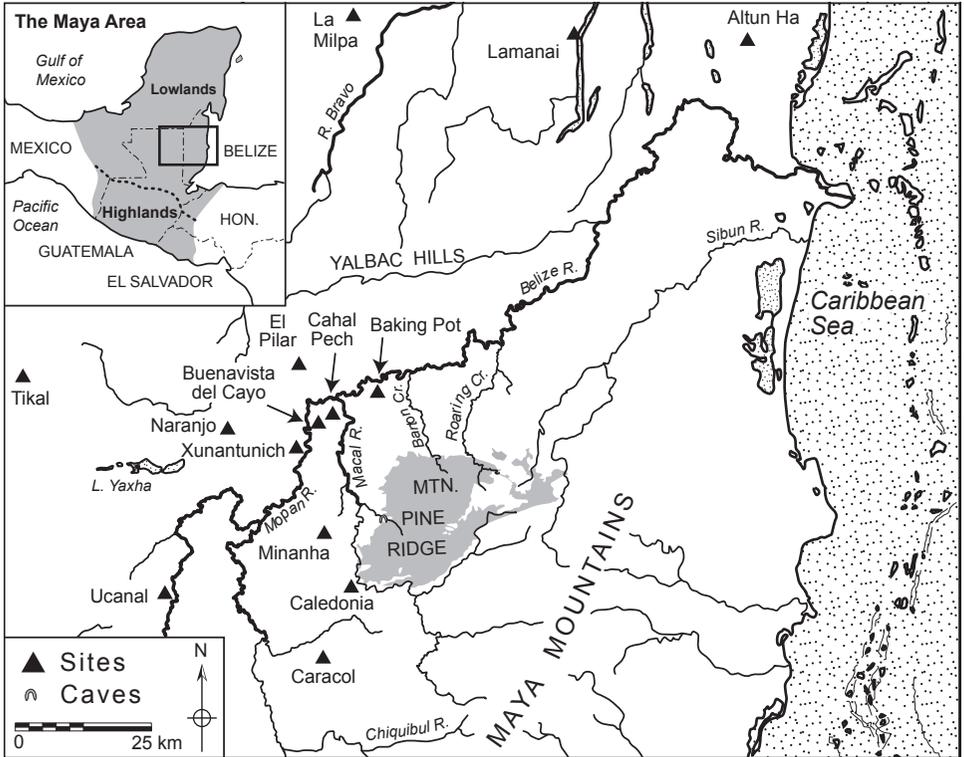


FIGURE 1.1. The Maya lowlands of central Belize and eastern Peten, Guatemala, showing selected Classic-period sites.

the site. As early as the 1840s, the nearby town of San Ignacio served as a staging area for archaeological expeditions into Guatemala's Peten (Pendergast 1967). Some early scholars visited Xunantunich to document the site's carved stelae (Maler 1908:73–9; Morley 1937–38:204–13), but most sought out sites in Guatemala, in part because of their larger size and more numerous and better-preserved carved monuments. One exception was Thomas Gann (1894–95, 1925), who probed some of Xunantunich's larger structures in Group A and first recorded the site of Actuncan, located 2 km north of Xunantunich.

Gann was a medical doctor by training, and he was not known for having a rigorous excavation methodology. It was not until 1938 that more

systematic archaeological excavations took place at Xunantunich, directed by Sir J. Eric S. Thompson. Through close analysis of the ceramic material recovered from Group B, Thompson (1942) established the region's first ceramic chronology. In the decades following World War II, a series of researchers worked at Xunantunich, most of whom focused on the largest and most imposing building at the site, the massive 39 m tall acropolis nicknamed the "Castillo." The most active researcher was A. H. Anderson, the first archaeological commissioner of British Honduras. In 1949, Anderson rediscovered the stucco frieze first identified by Gann on the eastern façade of Str. A-6, the multiroom building that formed the lower story of the Castillo's final two-storey superstructure.

The following year, Linton Satterthwaite (1950a, 1950b) exposed and documented much of the frieze. Later in that decade, Michael Stewart conducted excavations in Group A from 1952 to 1954, focusing on Strs. A-2 and A-16, and he investigated Group C in 1957. Anderson continued to work at Xunantunich during the 1950s and into the 1960s, opening the site for tourism and conducting some research, most notably excavating and consolidating several buildings on the Castillo, including Str. A-5 and some of the rooms of Str. A-6 (Anderson 1966). In 1959 and 1960, Euan MacKie (1961, 1985) excavated two range structures, Strs. A-11 and A-15, and a commoner's house. He argued that Str. A-11 was the ruler's palace, and he suggested that an earthquake caused the abandonment of the site and collapse of the polity.

For the next several decades, archaeological fieldwork at Xunantunich was primarily concerned with architectural consolidation. In 1968 and 1971, Peter Schmidt (1974), archaeological commissioner of Belize at the time, conducted excavations in Plaza A-III and Plaza A-I. Along the south side of Str. A-1, he excavated beneath the butts of Stela 8 and Stela 10 and beneath an uncarved altar. He also cleared and, in some cases, consolidated several structures (Graham 1979). Schmidt thoroughly excavated rooms of Str. A-6 and reconstructed the roof comb. Joseph Palacio, archaeological commissioner after Schmidt, directed the reconstruction and consolidation of the A-6 frieze, which had been severely damaged by exposure to the elements after Hurricane Hattie tore off its roof in 1961. While Elizabeth Graham was archaeological commissioner, she continued consolidation efforts on the frieze and elsewhere on the Castillo, inasmuch as cracks had opened up in the acropolis due to the weight

of the reconstructed masonry and the 1976 Guatemala earthquake that rocked the region. In 1979, looting in Group B led to a salvage excavation by David Pendergast and Graham (1981).

Building on this body of work and their own excavations at Cahal Pech and Buenavista del Cayo, Joseph Ball and Jennifer Taschek (1991) reconsidered Xunantunich from a regional perspective. They proposed that the site was a regal-ritual center, functioning as a retreat or castle on the hill for the polity ruler who lived at the site of Buenavista del Cayo, located 6 km down the Mopan River. They argued that Buenavista del Cayo, not Xunantunich, was the Late Classic administrative center of the valley, and that the Buenavista del Cayo polity was subordinate to the larger center of Naranjo, located 14 km to the west. One of the goals of the XAP research design, therefore, was to examine this model from the perspective of Xunantunich by reconstructing the history of the site, identifying the range of political and economic activities that occurred there, examining how political authority was expressed through the site's art and architecture, and investigating the relationships between the site's rulers and hinterland populations (Leventhal and Ashmore 2004).

## The Xunantunich Archaeological Project

When the XAP investigations began in 1991, new maps of Xunantunich and Actuncan were sorely needed. Although Ian Graham's (1978) map of Xunantunich was a marked improvement over previous versions, it did not fully depict the site's architectural complexity and left out many features, including quarries, terraces, and some domestic structures. A new map of the four monumental groups that form the site center (Groups A through D) and adjacent nonmonumental features was begun in 1991 and finished in 1992, with subsequent revisions made in light of XAP fieldwork (see fig. 1.2). The mapping was accomplished by collecting data with a Total Station and generating maps using Surfer and GenericCAD software. James McGovern's (1993) survey of Actuncan effectively tripled the known size of that site after he discovered a large zone of previously unknown monumental architecture. He also mapped residential structures running east from the site down to the Mopan River.

The XAP excavations focused on the monumental heart of Xunantunich, Group A. They included significant efforts on the Castillo, including



not only Str. A-6 and its western frieze, but many of the other structures on the great acropolis. Structure A-1 was the target of extensive excavations and consolidation, while less-ambitious programs of investigation targeted the other structures flanking the east and west sides of Plazas A-I and A-II and the quadrangle of structures that frame Plaza A-III. Exciting new discoveries were also made in some of the site's less-imposing structures, like Ballcourt 2, buried beneath the western side of Str. A-1, the entranceway at the northeast corner of Plaza A-II, and the paved sacbe running from Plaza A-I to Str. A-21. Although Groups B, C, and D had been recognized for quite some time, XAP investigations targeted these areas for additional excavations in order to better understand the activities that occurred there and their relationships to those at Group A.

The XSS was designed to place Xunantunich within the context of its hinterlands (see fig. 1.3). Its research questions focused on the factors that influenced hinterland settlement choices; how they changed through time, especially in reference to the late and rapid florescence of Xunantunich in the Late and Terminal Classic periods; and the degree and nature of integration between the rulers of Xunantunich and its diverse hinterland residents. Project members were fortunate that the region has such a long history of settlement research. Gordon Willey's Barton Ramie project (Willey et al. 1965) set the standard for survey and excavation of Maya housemounds in the late 1950s, and by the time the XAP investigations began, the entire upper Belize River valley was witnessing an intense amount of archaeological research (Awe 1992; Ball and Taschek 1991; Ford and Fedick 1992; Graham, Jones, and Kautz 1985; Healy 1990; Laporte and Torres 1987; also see Garber 2004 for more details). These projects have provided comparative data that deepen and broaden our interpretations (synthesized in chapter 3).

When XSS project members began their hinterland studies, most explanations of settlement patterning in the area were environmental in nature, highlighting the adaptive strategies of farmers. Anabel Ford and Scott Fedick's (1992) research demonstrated that the area's fertile, well-drained uplands sustained greater population densities than the alluvial floodplains. With these results in mind, Ashmore designed survey transects radiating out from Xunantunich that would cross different environmental zones and sample both the Mopan and Macal river valleys. These transects were surveyed between 1993 and 1995. Members of the