


ARTICLE

# Maya Pilgrimage, Migration, and Community Connectivity at Ritual Landscapes at Mensabak, Chiapas, Mexico

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## Abstract

Anthropologists have demonstrated that having information about new settlements is crucial for drawing migrants. Pilgrimage to ritual landscapes and their shrines allows people, including Maya societies, to explore places where they can settle. They then establish or augment settlements around the landscape shrines, which explains the locations and growth of some centers. Migrants continue to make pilgrimages to shrines, such as sacred mountains, near their receiving settlements to enhance community cohesion through ritual contact with spiritual forces. In this article, I show that pilgrimage is an important element in the establishment of select migrant settlements and their community identity. I focus on Maya and Mesoamerican cultures, particularly at Mensabak in Chiapas, Mexico, and on supporting archaeological, historical, and ethnographic information. I conclude that Maya perceptions of movement, connectivity, and transformation in their world are linked to pilgrimage, migration, and community formation. Importantly, pilgrimage provides a religious variable, in addition to better-known economic, political, or demographic factors, to consider in migration.

## Resumen

Estudios antropológicos han mostrado que la información sobre asentamientos nuevos son importantes para los migrantes. Las personas, especialmente en el área maya, migran a santuarios en el paisaje ritual, como montañas sagradas. Ellos pueden establecer asentamientos cerca de los santuarios, lo cual explica las localizaciones y el crecimiento de algunos centros. Los migrantes continúan peregrinando a los santuarios cerca de sus nuevos asentamientos para establecer solidaridad comunitaria a través de contactos rituales con los dioses y ancestros. Este artículo muestra que el peregrinar es un elemento importante para establecer asentamientos de migrantes y una identidad comunitaria. Considero las cultura mayas y mesoamericanas, específicamente en Mensabak, Chiapas, México, por medio de la arqueología, etnohistoria, y etnografía. Propongo que las percepciones de los mayas acerca del movimiento, conectividad y transformación en su mundo están ligados a peregrinar, emigrar y formar una comunidad. La peregrinación presenta un elemento religioso para enfocar la migración humana, y no solamente en los factores económicos, políticos o demográficos.

**Keywords:** pilgrimage; migration; landscapes; community; Maya

**Palabras clave:** peregrinación; migración; paisajes rituales; comunidad; Maya

Pilgrimage to landscape shrines has been involved in migration in Mesoamerica and other areas. However, pilgrimage studies usually consider the ritual transformations of people who travel to shrines, and analyses of migrations typically concentrate on political and economic disruptions as push factors. Yet religious pilgrimage in migration and community-strengthening rituals at significant landscape features performed by people after they have migrated are also important. Furthermore, both pilgrimage and migration can be linked to cultural concepts of movement, connectivity, and transformation. Thus, pilgrimages approximate migrations because they involve movements to significant

places leading to social change and renewal (Aguilar and Preucel 2019; Nelson and Strawhacker 2011; Nelson et al. 2014). Importantly, investigators have not often focused on pilgrimage or religious factors in migration. A main contribution of this study is that migrants procure information on areas to where they can move through religious pilgrimages, making these movements rehearsals for migration. Pilgrimage allows migrants to build connections to local communities and to spiritual forces in ritual places while achieving balance in their world. Although political and economic disruptions in people's lives can lead to migration (Baker and Tsuda 2015), choices to relocate can also involve religious considerations, such as pilgrimage to ritual landscapes and connectivity to the cosmological forces (deities) residing there.

In this article, I contextualize pilgrimage, ritual landscapes, and migration through ideological perspectives of movement, connectivity, and transformation (Carlsen and Prechtel 1991; Duwe and Preucel 2019; Folan et al. 2016; Maffie 2014; Nelson and Strawhacker 2011; Orr 2001; Stanzione 2003; Wilson 1995). I focus on the Maya area, particularly at Mensabak (also Metzabok) in Chiapas, Mexico, but also draw on research on pilgrimage and migration in other societies. Maya and other Mesoamerican people made pilgrimages and congregated at ritual landscapes, which they associated with intrinsic movement, connectivity, and balance in their world (Maffie 2014; Stanzione 2003; Wilson 1995). Maya were drawn to places for economic and political reasons, but ceremonial communications with deities associated with these locales to assure people's well-being and transition were important for migration. Maya pilgrimage to ritual landscapes maintained their interaction and covenants with spiritual forces and involved frequent journeys to shrines. Based on ties they made with the ritual landscape and local populations, Maya people then migrated to a specific area. The religious impetus for pilgrimage and migration to shrines explains how they moved across the landscape, made connections with one another and with spiritual forces, understood transformations in their lives, and achieved community solidarity (Beekman 2021; Nelson et al. 2014).

There is ethnohistorical, archaeological, and linguistic evidence for multiple Maya migrations (Carmack 1981; Rice 2021). One historical instance illustrates the relationship among pilgrimage, migration to ritual landscapes, life transitions, and community cohesion. During the Caste War of Yucatán around 1850, Maya encountered a cross carved in a tree near a sacred well. This cross had the power of prophetic speech; it claimed to have been sent by God to assist Maya rebels against mestizo rule and to miraculously deflect bullets. Maya named this site Chan Santa Cruz ("Small Sacred Cross") after the shrine and built a church there; the site's fame and population grew (Dumond 1997; Villa Rojas 1945:20–21). Maya pilgrims then moved to this shrine to perform ceremonies for resident deities. They established ties with the local population and landscape as they built their homes and cultivated their fields. Through the immigrants' labor and ceremonial participation, Maya political and religious leaders here gained power. This center became rival to none among Indigenous settlements. War and the quest for land pushed Maya to this center, but religious motivations for migration and community building pulled them to this place. Pilgrimage to the well and the cross's protection resulted in migrations to Chan Santa Cruz instead of other villages. Rituals bolstered the community, transformed it into a political and religious center, and reinforced native beliefs in movement, connectivity, and transition to a balanced world. This example illustrates that people can migrate based on religious considerations, which are just as pragmatic for them as economic and political reasons.

Many investigators recognize, but do not adequately explore, pilgrimage and ritual ties to the landscape as variables in population movement, settlement formation, and migrant community cohesion (Baker and Tsuda 2015:303; Bullock 2021; García Barrios and Valencia Rivera 2009; Nelson and Strawhacker 2011). Pilgrimage is a "pull factor" to a place in migration, and such variables can be harder to identify than disruptive "push factors," which are covered more often in the literature (Rice 2021). With information gained from pilgrimages to ritual landscapes, migrants arrived at religiously important places like Mensabak. Ceremonies at Mensabak shrines promoted interaction, connectiveness to spiritual forces, and community solidarity among migrants, and rituals were central to facilitating their transition and sense of belonging in their world (Duwe and Preucel 2019; Stanzione 2003; Wilson 1995).

## Migration and Pilgrimage: Orienting Perspectives

Humans, even groups viewed as being sedentary, are mobile (Cabana and Clark 2011). Indeed, population movements occur across the globe, and archaeological evidence points to migrations even in settled agricultural societies (Anthony 1990; Beekman 2019; Rouse 1986). Humans create settlements with permanent architecture and fields, but they migrate following disruptions, such as political and economic unrest (Baker and Tsuda 2015): war, environmental degradation, and economic downturns are key push factors (Anthony 1990; Beekman 2019). However, people can also relocate based on religious prophecies and mythology, which provide ritual pull factors for migration (García Barrios and Valencia Rivera 2009; Lyons 2003:97). Importantly, migrants move to places about which they have information, including about the economic and religious life at host communities (Baker and Tsuda 2015; Duff 1998:33; Kantner 2011:365).

We must examine both push and pull factors to understand how and why populations move to an area (Anthony 1990; Lyons 2003; Ortman and Cameron 2011:240). Although people can be forced out of settlements, they can decide to relocate or be pulled to areas evaluated during religious pilgrimage. People move to sites after they have discovered lands, allies, and strong economies while on pilgrimage (Anthony 1990; Clark 2001:2–4; Rice 2018:110–111). Importantly, pull factors center on social and economic interaction between sending and receiving communities (Baker and Tsuda 2015). In colonial period Yucatán, for instance, Maya population movements to new settlements were the norm (Farriss 1984; Ruz 2009). Maya migrated when social cohesion unraveled, populations required more agricultural land, or problems erupted between commoners and elites (Farriss 1984:200). Religious pull factors also influenced their migrations.

Over the last 20 years, our knowledge of migration processes based on cultural and demographic changes in the artifactual record has increased (Beekman 2019; Cabana and Clark 2011; Clark 2001; Rice 2018). Archaeological migration research has concentrated on the southwestern United States (Clark 2001; Lyons 2003; Nelson and Strawhacker 2011) and Mesoamerica (Beekman 2019; Beekman and Christensen 2011; Rice 2018, 2021), from which investigators can draw crucial insights, like at Mensabak. These studies show that chronology, material culture, and the identification of social units are necessary elements in the study of past migrations (Rouse 1986). New architecture, pottery, and trade items often indicate the presence of migrants (Clark 2001; Lyons 2003). Increasing architectural aggregations or settlement shifts may signal population intrusion. In Arizona's Tonto Basin, for example, the introduction of masonry compounds and corrugated pottery indicate migrations from the north (Clark 2001:74–76). These new settlements were separate from but close to established communities where migrants sought connections (Clark 2001). Demographic changes, such as population influxes to settlements, clearly mark migrations (Bullock 2021; Clark 2001).

Migration has occurred when archaeological populations increased in excess of natural demographic growth (Ortman and Cameron 2011:236) or aggregated in a new region (Duff 1998:31); it can also lead to the formation of separate enclaves in receiving communities (Clark 2001; Stone and Lipe 2011:275). These separate habitation clusters can mark rapid population growth from different migrant groups (Clark 2001; Stone and Lipe 2011:282). This pattern indicates that migrants joined settlements and created a new community, as we see at Mensabak: households, families, or lineages made up the migratory social units (Beekman 2019; Bullock 2021; Duff 1998:44). For Mesoamerican communities, migration myth histories and the search for a new land, or returning to a homeland, were commonplace. Families, lineages, and whole communities were on the move (Beekman 2019; Fowles 2011). Migrations were conflated with pilgrimages across the ritual landscape as people experienced movement, connectivity, and transformation during settlement relocation (Figure 1). Although some investigators argue that some Maya and Mesoamerican migration narratives are partially mythological (Boone 1991; Carmack 1981; Gillespie 1989; Schroeder 2019), these people experienced movement, pilgrimage, and migration as essential parts of their world (Beekman 2019; Ruz 2009).

Generally, scholars view pilgrimage as a journey for religious purposes in which worshipers travel to sacred places for spiritual devotion, healing, reinforcing cultural and personal identity,



**Figure 1.** Pilgrimage and migration across the landscape in Central Mexican societies as natural movement, connectivity, and transformation (Codex Azcatitlán, p. 5; Library of Congress, public domain). (Color online)

undertaking vows, or making offerings for something they acquired (McCorrison 2011; Turner and Turner 1978). Additionally, landscape shrines with ceremonial architecture are important places for communal ceremonies, particularly for societies with mythological-historical and spiritual connections to locations like mountains, islands, springs, and caves (Boone 1991; Schachner 2011). These are people's origin places and the homes of ancestors and deities. Shrines and settlements are sited at religiously important landscapes, as populations cluster around shrines that pilgrims visit—and not just near water sources or trade routes (Aguilar and Preucel 2019; Silverman 1993; Wheatley 1971). Pilgrimage can lead to migration to a religiously significant place, as with Jewish people moving to Israel (Winkelman and Dubisch 2005:xiv–xviii). These places are expressions of identity and belonging, which provide societies with economic, religious, and political connections (Turner and Turner 1978). Gatherings at ritual landscapes are collective in nature, and social solidarity is reinforced (Palka 2014; Turner and Turner 1978).

Mesoamerican people, including Maya, view pilgrimage as journeys to sacred places related to movements and connectivity inherent in the world as recounted through myth-histories (Folan et al. 2016; Gorza 2006; Maffie 2014; Schroeder 2019). Pilgrimage to ritual landscapes in these cultures may occur often (Broda et al. 2001; Palka 2014; Vogt 1981). Through pilgrimage, we can better understand perceptions of landscape, migration dynamics, and ties to ritual places and the communities that use them. When Mesoamericans migrate, they move through the ritual landscape, which contains pilgrimage shrines that bring communities together through scheduled ceremonies (Freidel 1981; Kantner 2011:366). Periodic travels to ritual landscapes are seen as natural movements that allow people to communicate with spiritual forces, gain merit for maintaining their world, carry out reciprocal obligations with deities, visit territory, and initiate people into communities (Aguilar and Preucel 2019; Barabas 2006; Duwe 2020; Monaghan 1995). The religious factors in migration include the desire to be at a particular sanctuary, live near spiritually powerful places, and move to a sacred area (Boone 1991; García Barrios and Valencia Rivera 2009). In some migrations, pilgrimage is crucial for learning about places and for establishing ties among people and the landscape. Migrants' adaptation to new areas is facilitated by their ceremonies and oral histories that connect them to local ritual landscapes and deities there. The topographic features are endowed as places of creation, homes of ancestors, and locations for contacting deities from mythological-historical narratives.



**Figure 2.** Aztec ancestors leave Aztlan island on a pilgrimage and migration (footprints) to ritual landscapes (Codex Boturini, folio 1; Wikimedia Commons, public domain).

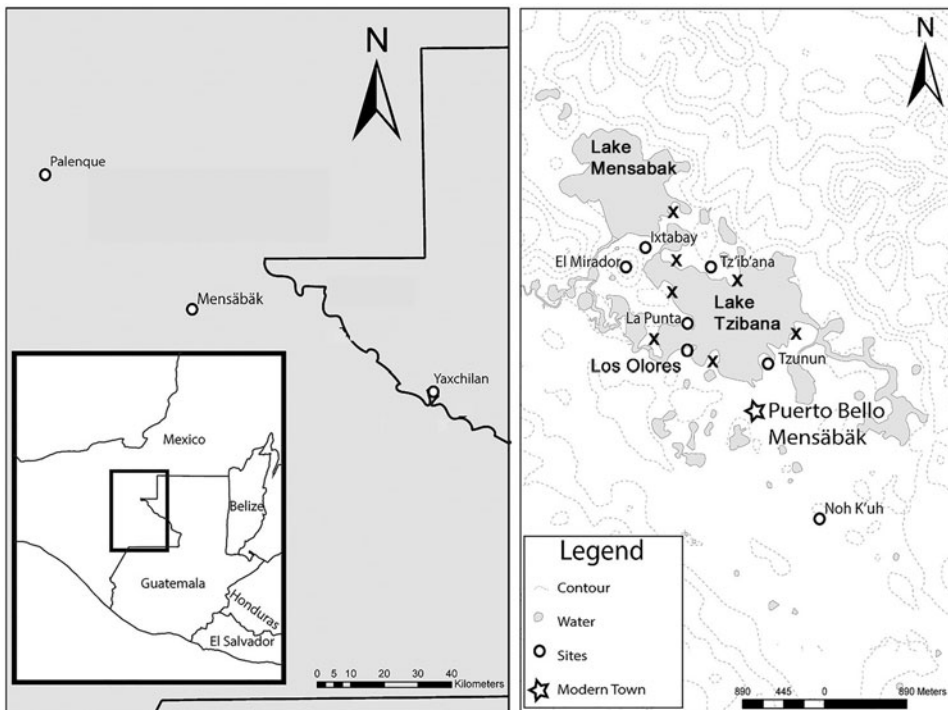
In Mesoamerica, people have recounted pilgrimages to ritual landscapes where they established settlements and community, including Aztec migrations to the island of Tenochtitlan in central Mexico (Beekman and Christensen 2011; Boone 1991; Matos Moctezuma 2014; Schroeder 2019). Scholars who critically examined Aztec and other Nahuatl histories of pilgrimage and migration found that the archaeological and linguistic evidence clearly supports population movements (Beekman 2019; Carmack 1981; Fowler 1989; Gillespie 1989; Smith 1984). Aztec pilgrimage from Aztlan and Chicomoztoc to Tenochtitlan demonstrates the importance of movement, connectivity to ritual landscapes, and community transformation that is comparable to Maya histories. Under the guidance of their god Huitzilopochtli, Aztecs migrated from mythological-historical Aztlan, an island with temples on a sacred mountain (Culuacan) in a lake with herons, and from Chicomoztoc, a mountain with ritual caves (Figure 2), to reach their homeland. Aztlan also had a spring from which a river came forth. Aztecs first made a pilgrimage to and then settled at the sacred Chicomoztoc mountain, which they knew from conducting rites there (Schroeder 2019:150–155). On their arrival, Aztecs established pilgrimage shrines and settlements at ritual landscapes, like at Malinalco mountain, where they sought connections with resident deities (Duran 1994 [1588]:20–48; García Barrios and Valencia Rivera 2009:81–83). Aztec people continued to pilgrimage–migrate until they settled at the island of Tenochtitlan and formed an *altepetl*, a “water mountain, polity, and place for community” (Barabas 2006; Schroeder 2019:157–158). They built temples and houses on the island and transformed it into a political, economic, and religious center (Matos Moctezuma 2014:57–62). This Aztlan-like island attracted worshipers and settlers. The Aztecs also maintained shrines at Chapultepec hill and Mount Tlaloc where they conducted rituals for cosmic renewal, world balance, and community well-being (García Barrios and Valencia Rivera 2009).

During these migrations, Nahuatl peoples moved as far as Nicaragua to form a community at a sacred center on Ometepe Island on which there were mountain temples similar to those at Aztlan (Chapman 1974:70–71). Nahuatl pilgrimages and migrations paralleled the myth-histories of other Mesoamerican societies and provided a model for cultural origins, movement, connections with gods and peoples, community building, and ritual landscapes; for example, the Itzaj (Itza’) Maya founded their Aztlan-like island of Noh Peten after migrating from Yucatán (Rice 2018), and K’iche’ (Quiche) Maya migrated by waterways to hilltop shrines in Guatemala (Carmack 1981; Earle 2008). As witnessed at Mensabak and these migrations, Maya followed widespread beliefs on movement, connectivity, and transformation at ritual landscapes.

### Maya Pilgrimage and Migration to Mensabak Landscapes

Mensabak refers to the area with archaeological sites around two large lakes: Mensabak and Tzibana. According to ceramic, historical, and archaeological data (Hernandez 2017; Palka 2014), Maya migrated to Mensabak shrines in Chiapas, Mexico, from the Late Postclassic period (around AD 1400–1520) to colonial times (around AD 1520–1700) where they established new settlements (Figure 3). Coeval family migrations from the Yucatán peninsula to this area are attested in documents (Ruz 2009). Rituals at landscape shrines were interwoven into Chiapas historical narratives of migration and community founding. One Tzeltal Maya myth-history discusses the migration of a noble named Votan and his followers near, and possibly at, Mensabak in Late Postclassic times (Bassie-Sweet 2015:4–6). Votan is an ancestral and day name in the Tzeltal calendar, which probably came from an Aztec word and influence (De Vos 1980; Fowler 1989). Colonial sources state that this noble of the Chan (snake) lineage, who may have been from Yucatán or Tabasco, moved up the Usumacinta River with his allies to establish a kingdom (Calnek 1988). Political, economic, and population growth followed. Votan founded the center of Na Chan (“Snake House?”) at a lake. This center may have been near Lake Catazaja (Trens 1999:15) or another lake, possibly at Mensabak. Some claim that Votan founded an additional site at the Tumbalá mountains (Calnek 1988) near Mensabak. After traveling to visit Aztecs, Votan founded the capital of Tulha (Tulja), possibly referring to the Tulija River originating at Mensabak.

The Mensabak ritual landscapes and settlements attracted migrants following the collapse of Maya states, Aztec intrusions, and the Spanish conquest (Ruz 2009). Maya lineages established several settlements where few had lived for centuries. Archaeological research at the site provides insights on the establishment of Maya ceremonial ties to spiritual forces in ritual landscapes, which increased community cohesion. An extraordinary mountain—its red cliff, caves, and shrines on an Aztlan-like island in a beautiful lake that is the source of the Tulija River—drew pilgrims and migrants to Mensabak, instead of nearby lakes (Figure 4). The Mirador Mountain (also El Mirador) on an island dividing Lakes



**Figure 3.** Mensabak in Chiapas, Mexico, and its major lakes, excavated archaeological sites (O), uninvestigated sites (X), and modern Lacandon village (figure by the author and Santiago Juarez).



**Figure 4.** The Mirador Mountain–island pilgrimage shrine (photograph by the author). *Bottom left:* Ceramic stamp depicting Mirador Mountain flanked by birds (photograph by the author); *bottom center:* sacred mountain toponyms (Codex Nuttall, p. 48; Famsi.org, public domain); *bottom right:* the Aztlan mountain-island (Codex Aubin, folio 2v-3r; Fordham University Visual Resource Collections, public domain). (Color online)

Tzibana and Mensabak dominates the landscape. This mountain, called Chak Aktun (“Red Hollow [turtle] Mountain [cave with water]”) by Lacandon Maya, was a monumental pilgrimage shrine. The shrine gained religious importance in Late Postclassic times likely through pilgrimage–migration myth-histories, like those of the Aztecs (Beekman 2019; Duran 1994:20–22; Folan et al. 2016; Gillespie 1989:78–80). Mirador Mountain’s likeness to an archetypal Aztlan—a mountain on an island in a picturesque lake with herons where a river forms—did not escape the visitors and worshipers. Mensabak also recalls mythological-historical Tamoanchan, an origin place, and Tlalocan, a paradise of the dead, both of which are associated with water, mountains, caves, and vegetation (López Austin 1997).

The ritual landscape and community at Mensabak attracted Maya and likely Aztec traders and pilgrims. The settlement grew, and the community coalesced through collective ceremonies at shrines. Today, Lacandon state that Mensabak is the center of the world because of its landscapes of mythological origin, especially Mirador Mountain, and its concentration of ancient Maya shrines. Under pressure by Tzeltal Maya seeking farmland, Lacandon moved to Mensabak to form their community in the 1960s (Palka 2005). Their migrations were precipitated by information gathered on pilgrimages to shrines and ritual movements around the lakes (Boremanse 2020). Lacandon, like their Maya ancestors, make pilgrimages to these landscapes to engage in rituals of community well-being and belonging.

Mensabak and its lakes are in a valley with conjoining lakes near the Usumacinta River (see Figure 3) where people moved between the Pacific and Gulf coasts. Mensabak Lacandon identify several lakes, each with resident deities at shoreline shrines. Water drains into the valley, including the Naja River, which empties into Lake Tzibana. Water exits through a sinkhole near Mirador Mountain that emerges just west of Lake Mensabak. The spring here, called Hol Tulija (Tulija headwaters) is the source of the Tulija River, which flows to the Gulf of Mexico after passing many Maya settlements. Maya visited Mensabak by traveling along the valley and its waterways, particularly up the Tulija River. People arrived at Mirador Mountain and first performed rituals at a shrine named Ixtabay

on its northern base. This shrine has canoe ports, stone block temples, and wide platforms near a plaza that provided storage and housing for pilgrims ascending the mountain.

The impressive ritual landscape at Mensabak has significant pilgrimage shrines (Palka and Sánchez Balderas 2013). Mirador Mountain symbolized a place of belonging, connectivity, and of things people need, such as food and water, following Mesoamerican ideals of ritual mountains and lakes, including Aztlan, Chicomoztoc, Tamoanchan, and Tollan, the place of the reeds (Broda et al. 2001; Folan et al. 2016; López Austin 1997; Pitarch 2010; Sandstrom and Effrein Sandstrom 2023). Importantly, the cleft peak and red-stained cliff on Mirador Mountain's east side can be seen for miles. Red is an important color for Mesoamericans because it is associated with sacrifice, the gods, and the rising sun (Earle 2008). At every site at Mensabak, Late Postclassic to colonial period Maya used ceramic stamps of the same form (see Figure 4) that represent this sacred place and community identity. The numerous stamps show a hollow Mirador Mountain filled with water, flanked by a double-headed bird or birds, perhaps Aztlan-like herons. The stamps also resemble ritual mountain names in Mesoamerican codices.

On the mountain peak, a cave is flanked by a stone temple and plaza, which formed a principal Maya pilgrimage shrine at this site. Maya tossed ceramic offerings into the cave shaft behind this temple and left ceramic plates in nearby fissures as offerings to resident deities (Palka 2014). Maya also built 13 terraces with altars, shrines, and plazas for people to ascend and perform rituals; these terraces represent the 13 sectors of the Mesoamerican underworld. Pilgrims traveled through these conceptual levels as they ascended and descended the mountain. Ceramics from excavations in the plaza near the temple atop the mountain and over one terrace with a boulder shrine indicate that Late Preclassic Maya first built the ceremonial complexes around 200 BC–AD 200 (Nuñez Ocampo 2015). These Maya did not build residential structures on the mountain, but rather at the city of Noh K'uh one kilometer south of the lakes. Excavations at the shrine's base encountered a few Classic to Early Postclassic ceramics (about AD 300–900) left by a small number of Maya pilgrims (Nuñez Ocampo 2015:Appendix 1). No residential sites dating to these periods have been found at Mensabak to date (Juarez et al. 2019; Palka 2014).

Later, many Late Postclassic to colonial period Maya migrated to Mensabak, which had not been home for Maya for centuries. Ceramic types, particularly Matillas Fine Orange wares, indicate social ties with Chontal Maya in Tabasco and Campeche (Nuñez Ocampo 2015). Ceramic colanders and high-neck water jars may indicate social interaction with the Chiapas highlands. Mensabak Maya may have traded with these people, or those from the highlands may have visited or moved to Mensabak. Importantly, migrants to Mensabak created different sites around the lakes instead of forming one main settlement. Only population influxes can explain the rapid population growth and creation of separate sites by different groups. The various habitation areas around the lakes range from small centers of several hundred people to domestic platforms of a few families. The sites have defensive walls, perhaps indicating conflicts between migrants and established populations; however, they were likely for the purpose of defense against outside attackers because the defensive works focus on the mainland and not lakeside access.

The largest excavated habitation sites of this period are Tzibana (or Tz'ib'ana), La Punta, Los Olores, and Tzunun. Two small residential platforms were also excavated at Ixtabay on the base of Mirador Mountain. Other small contemporaneous sites are present at Mensabak, but they have not yet been investigated (see Figure 3). The Tzibana habitation site is located on a peninsula in Lake Tzibana where Preclassic Maya had constructed temples (Figure 5). A ceremonial cliff with paintings; a monumental, feathered serpent carving; and a large cave with human burials and ceramic offerings attracted Maya worshipers (Figure 6). The feathered serpent may have been related to Votan's snake house shrine center described earlier or the establishment of a Quetzalcoatl (Kulkulkan for Maya) pilgrimage site common at this time (Folan et al. 2016; Ringle et al. 1998). Postclassic migrants constructed habitation platforms and defensive walls on the plaza at Tzibana that is surrounded by Preclassic temples. Some Tzibana houses are taller and have more dressed stone blocks than at other settlements, indicating that the inhabitants had access to more resources and labor. Additionally, the site may have been established first, and building construction may have increased



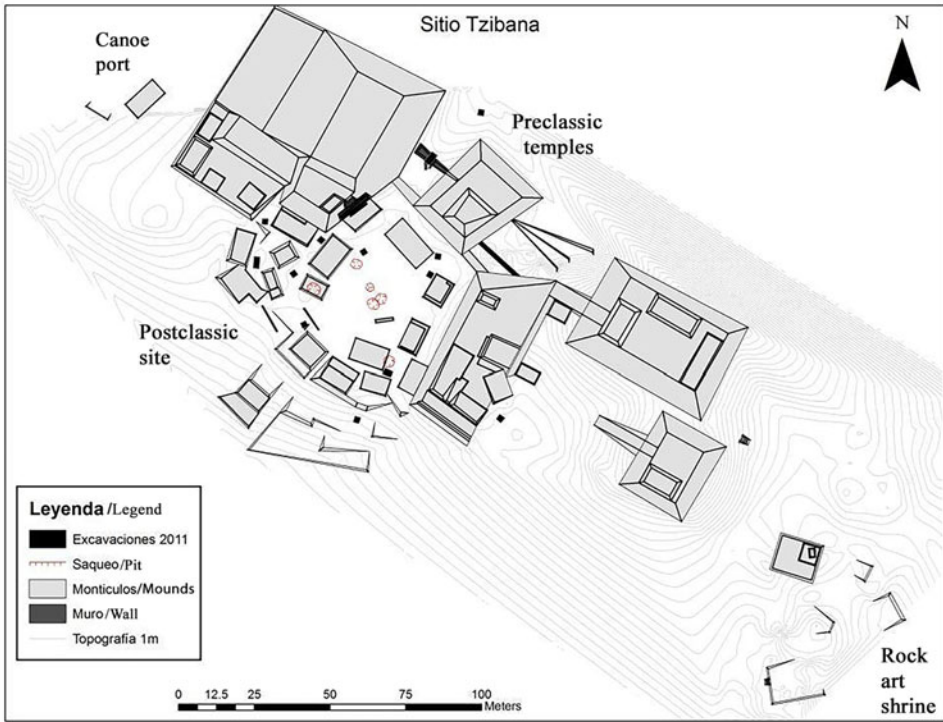


Figure 5. Map of Preclassic temples, Late Postclassic habitation platforms over a plaza floor, Late Postclassic platforms near a cliff with rock art, and the ceremonial cave at Tzibana (figure by the author and Santiago Juarez).

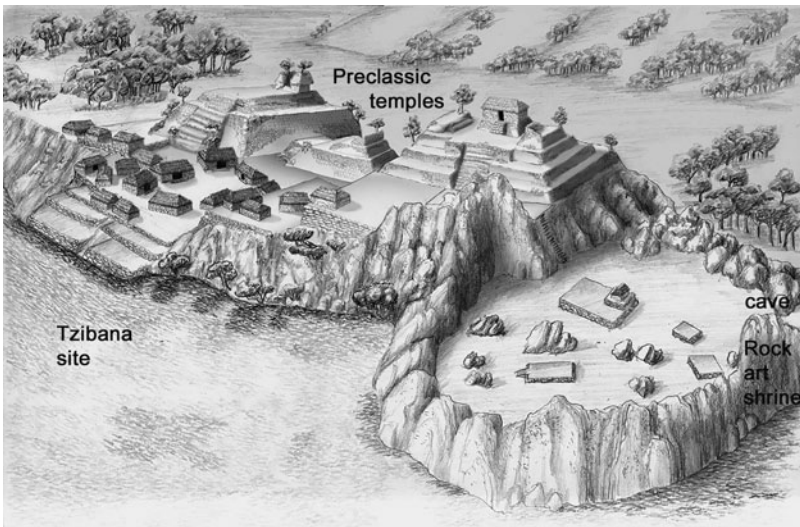
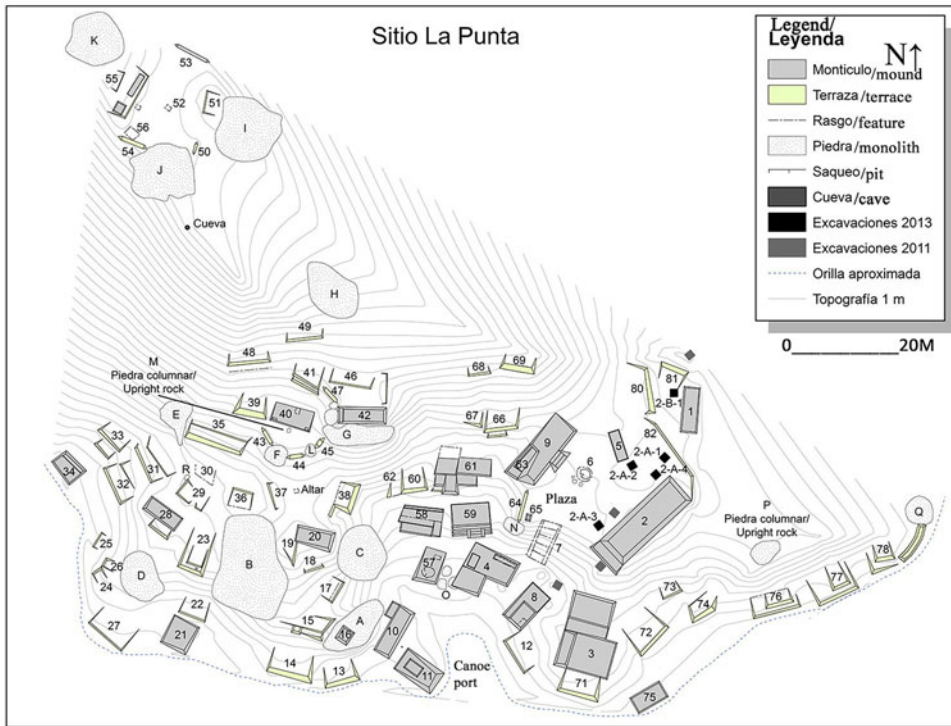


Figure 6. Late Postclassic and colonial period Maya residential clusters and shrines at Tzibana (figure by the author and Santiago Juarez).

over time. The many large domestic buildings of high-status Maya likely indicate that Tzibana housed founding lineages and “apex families” who established the settlement and subsequently gained power over others (Anthony 1990:904).



**Figure 7.** The Late Postclassic political center of La Punta and (*top left*) hilltop shrine (figure by the author and Rebecca Deeb). (Color online)

The site of La Punta (Figure 7) has the greatest number of Late Postclassic to colonial period buildings at Mensabak, but they are generally smaller than the Tzibana buildings, indicating fewer high-status Maya lived there. Additionally, residential clusters of different families are found at this site located on the island of Mirador Mountain. Houses and walls protect the site's perimeter. The large number of buildings at La Punta suggests that Maya leaders here attracted many allies and families. Excavations in the plaza near Structure 2, a leader's residence, recovered evidence of communal feasting, such as large amounts of ceramics, animal bone, and ash from cooking fires. Copper bells, Aztec green obsidian from Pachuca in central Mexico, gray obsidian from El Chayal in Guatemala, marine shell ornaments, and Matillas Fine Orange pottery make up the abundant trade artifacts at this site. In addition, a ceremonial precinct with a plaza with an altar, platforms, and caves is on a hilltop just to the northwest. Hence, La Punta was an important political, religious, and economic center at Mensabak.

Another Late Postclassic to colonial period residential site, Tzunun (Figure 8), was placed on a fortified island at the southeastern end of Lake Tzibana (Hernandez 2017). Most structures date between AD 1000 and AD 1400, and the small numbers of Preclassic and possible Early Postclassic period ceramics from some mixed refuse suggest that a few early pilgrims and migrants lived here. However, these people did not establish a large residential site at Tzunun. Subsequently, Late Postclassic to colonial period Maya built low platforms in groups scattered throughout the site that were occupied by different lineages and families. The buildings' small sizes indicate that Tzunun was not home to many politically important families. Another residential site, Los Olores (Figure 9), was one of the smallest Late Postclassic to colonial period domestic sites on Lake Tzibana's southern shore (Kestle 2021). Maya built this site on a peninsula and placed defensive walls to protect the inhabitants from attackers on the mainland. This site includes a unique C-shaped residence, perhaps marking the ethnicity of the migrants, such as those from Peten to the

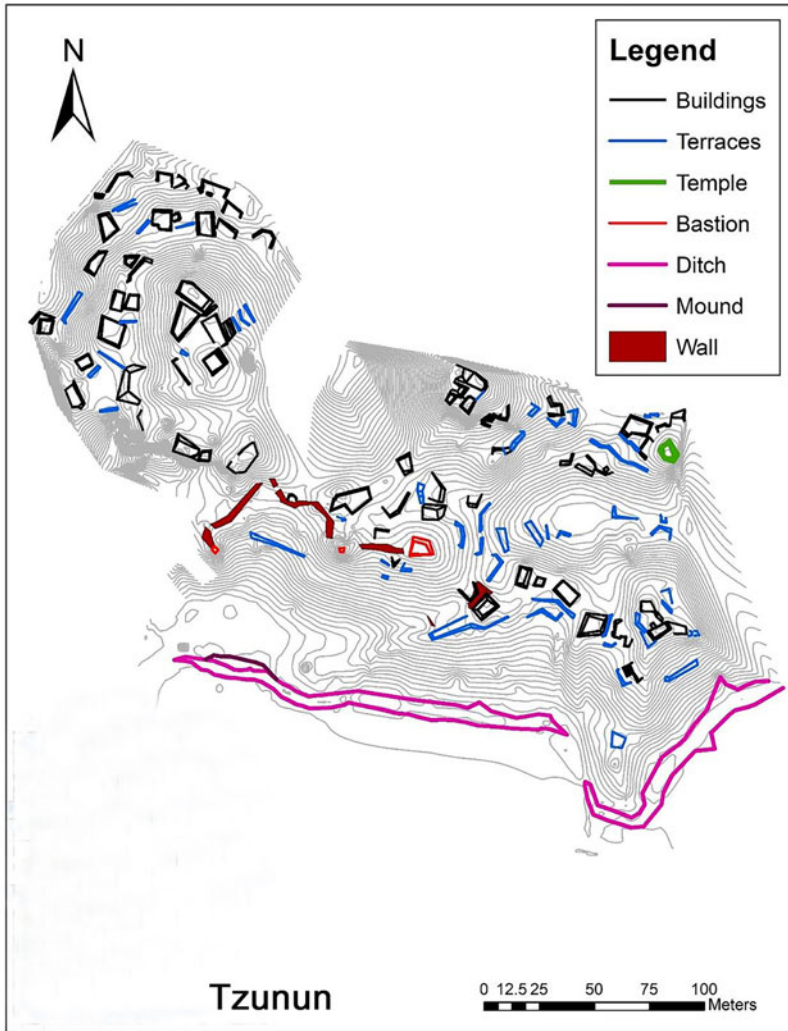


Figure 8. The Late Postclassic fortified habitation site of Tzunun (figure by the author and Chris Hernandez). (Color online)

east (Rice 2018). Maya at Los Olores randomly placed habitation platforms housing different families, perhaps from different areas, around the site like at La Punta and Tzunun.

Mensabak was at the nexus of trade and pilgrimage that linked Late Postclassic Maya and Aztec centers in the Gulf of Mexico, Chiapas highlands, and Pacific coast (Carmack 1981; Navarrete 1978). Political and economic disruptions during Aztec incursions into Chiapas and then the Spanish invasion resulted in population movements into the Mensabak area. Mirador Mountain, numerous shrines, and earlier residents enticed Maya to make pilgrimages and migrations to Mensabak instead of other sites. Although Late Postclassic to colonial period Maya lived in separate habitation sites at Mensabak, their social ties and community identity are evident in the large-scale collective rituals celebrated at shrines. In addition, the sites share the same ceramic types, reflecting this close interaction. Maya pilgrims and migrants visited the shrines to establish connections with resident spiritual forces and local populations. These communal shrines include an impressive cliff face across from Mirador Mountain. Modern Lacandon call this shrine the house of the god Mensabak, who welcomes the dead in the underworld and brings rain (similar to the Aztec Tlalocan; Boremanse 2020). At this cliff, the dead were buried (Cucina et al. 2015), and rock art designs—one showing

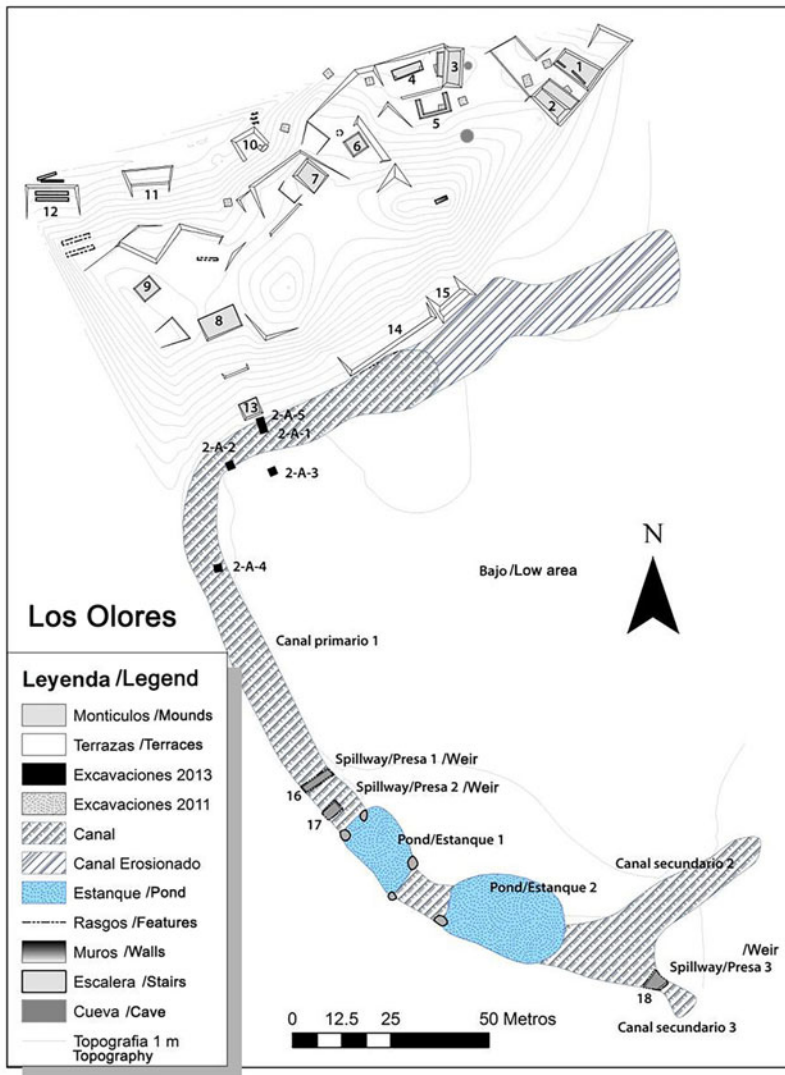


Figure 9. The small Late Postclassic settlement at Los Olores (figure by the author and Caleb Kestle). (Color online)

the god Mensabak (the Aztec Tlaloc; Palka 2014:290)—were painted above them. Maya gathered at this shrine to perform rituals, which included burning offerings, just like they did on the Mirador Mountain shrines and the Tzibana cave and cliff. The different populations used the shrines to cement community ties and foster connectivity to the landscape and its resident deities and ancestors. Therefore, Mensabak migrants followed Mesoamerican myth-histories of pilgrimage to ritual landscapes and the search for a sacred homeland.

### Landscapes, Pilgrimage Shrines, and Migration in Mesoamerican Communities

Mesoamerican pilgrimages over long distances and the subsequent developments of regional shrine centers are well documented in archaeological, historical, and ethnographic data. Maya, for example, did not just make pilgrimages to shrines around their settlements (Vogt 1981) but also went on long-distance ritual journeys. Spanish chroniclers mention that the sanctuaries of Cozumel, Chichen Itza, and Itzamal in Yucatán were major pilgrimage, market, and population centers (Farriss 1984:306–307). Archaeologists have shown that these centers grew over time, with their populations increasing

from Preclassic times to the Spanish conquest (Freidel 1981). Other pilgrimage centers include Esquipulas, Guatemala, and Tila, Chiapas, which continue to draw pilgrims and settlers to their shrines: today Maya make pilgrimages from their settlements in the highlands to sacred mountains and caves at Lake Atitlan in Guatemala and down to the coast to visit ancestral territories (Stanzione 2003). These sites grew because of Maya ritual devotion, pilgrimage, and migration, in a similar way to Mensabak. Maya pilgrimage movements are periodic events throughout the year, making them important for daily life. The movements replicate the quotidian travels of the sun, moon, and heavenly bodies, in addition to the motion seen on Earth of water, birds, and human bodily animation (Stanzione 2003; Stuart 2011:78–84). These movements express ties between people and their world, which lead to creation and renewal in society and the cosmos (Chevalier and Sánchez Bain 2003; López Austin 1997; Palka 2014).

Studies in Mesoamerica show that migrations, including those within the Maya area, were prevalent, that a sense of community belonging was linked to topographic features, and that pilgrimages to ritual landscapes involved population movements to new territory (Barabas 2006; Gorza 2006; Palka 2014). The migrations can be viewed as residential moves that correlate with the establishment of a community's spiritual center and the redefinition of a group's cosmological boundaries in the ritual landscape (Boone 1991; Chapman 1974; Fowles 2011:52; Fowler 1989; Gillespie 1989; Snead 2008). Indigenous pilgrimages and movement across the landscape allowed people to acquire knowledge that influenced their decisions to relocate to topographic shrines (Aguilar and Preucel 2019; Boone 1991; Kantner 2011). People's movement and visits to shrines helped them maintain social ties with one another and with their ancestors and deities in the landscape (Duwe and Preucel 2019; Monaghan 1995; Palka 2014). Pilgrimage and migration involved enactments of myths of origin and migration to culturally significant places (Folan et al. 2016; Fowles 2011:53; Schroeder 2019). The topographic information shared by pilgrims and their establishing of spiritual ties with landscape features led to additional population movements, connectivity with spiritual forces, and community ceremonies, like at Mensabak (Beekman 2021; Simpson 2016:273–274; Turner and Turner 1978).

Landscapes are significant for ritual, cosmology, and community identity for Maya and other Mesoamerican peoples (Barabas 2006; Christenson 2008). Over millennia, Indigenous groups performed ceremonies at landscape shrines that connected them to resident deities who would bring rain, food, and health for their communities (Broda et al. 2001). People maintained covenants, or reciprocal obligations of giving and receiving, with spiritual forces through rituals at the gods' houses in the ritual landscape (Astor Aguilera 2010; Monaghan 1995). In addition to being the abodes of the gods, significant landscape features, such as mountains, caves, and islands, constituted people's places of origin and the sources of things they needed, including human souls, food, and community wellness acquired through ritual and offerings (Pitarch 2010; Vogt 1981). Religious ceremonies in these landscapes brought people together and connected them to these places. Communities, peoples, and polities were often named after these locales (García Garagarza 2012:199).

Ritual landscapes, pilgrimage, and community establishment underscore the ideological connections between people, their surroundings, and migration in Mesoamerica. A group's religious connection to place is important, and if people moved, they would have to establish social ties with spiritual forces through ritual in new landscapes. Q'eqchi' Maya in Guatemala, for instance, state that migrating can be difficult if social ties and covenants with local deities are not ritually established first (Wilson 1995). Settlement founding and community cohesion rites were carried out by first creating shrines representing the place where people emerged or where their ancestors and patron gods reside. In some cases, the ritual landscape was a lake with an opening to spiritual realms, much like at Mensabak (Boone 1991; Snead 2008:83).

An illuminating ethnographic case of pilgrimage to ritual landscapes and migration that helps explain the processes that took place at Mensabak is that of the Tzotzil Maya of Larrainzar, Chiapas. Their ancestors left sacred Vaxakmen, a place with a large stone, and then they split up into groups that traveled through the landscape following the cardinal directions (Gorza 2006:50–73). These exact movements to shrines are portrayed in Mesoamerican myth-histories as both sacred pilgrimages and migrations to establish communities. One group migrated to Sacamch'en, a mountain

near Larrainzar, with a white cliff, a large cave, and boulders; it was an important Tzotzil Maya ritual landscape and origin place. Another group continued their journey to Larrainzar, which is located at a lake near a mountain called Junal. The community prospered near these landscapes because they were linked to their ancestors and gods. Tzotzil still make pilgrimages to these mountains, cliffs, and cave for community festivals, religious holidays, and political inaugurations. Not only are these landscapes woven into Tzotzil origins but they also believe that earth lords, who bring rain, agricultural fertility, and food, live there. Continuous pilgrimages to the earth lords' homes help people acquire things they need, including intangibles such as community cohesion.

The ancient Maya sites of Aguateca and Dos Pilas in southern Peten, Guatemala, for instance, also provide salient archaeological examples for pilgrimage and migration to ritual landscapes, as well as community integration through collective ceremonies. Late Classic (AD 600–700) Maya elites and supporting populations migrated from Tikal to establish new twin capitals at Aguateca and Dos Pilas (Houston 1993). This migration occurred during a period of regional political competition and war, which were central push factors for population movements. Within a brief period, monumental architecture and settlements were established at Aguateca and Dos Pilas where little habitation and public architecture had existed before. Choosing these areas may not have been just politically or economically motivated; pilgrimage to ritual landscapes to maintain covenants with spiritual forces was also important. Aguateca is situated on an impressive escarpment above a picturesque lake. The escarpment is split by a chasm that is depicted in the site's toponym, underscoring its cultural importance (Houston 1993:100). Some of the earliest monuments and shrines were discovered in the chasm, where investigators uncovered early ceremonial deposits dating from 300 BC to AD 500 (Inomata and Eberl 2010:145–147), suggesting that early Maya pilgrims came to conduct rituals to ancestral deities but not to live there. Excavations in ceremonial caves and temples at Dos Pilas similarly demonstrate ritual pull factors before Late Classic migrations. Pilgrimages to sacred caves at Dos Pilas began in the Middle Preclassic period (around 800 BC), well before Classic Maya settled there (Houston 1993). Ceramics from Dos Pilas and Aguateca support hieroglyphic texts that mention that the first ruler of the local dynasty was related to a Tikal ruler, indicating ties to people in distant central Peten (Foias and Bishop 2013). People knew of the shrines and settlements at Aguateca and Dos Pilas, which may have influenced their decision to move to these specific sites and not elsewhere. Collective rituals continued in the landscapes as the migrants pursued protection from resident spiritual forces in a time of conflict and population movement (Palka 2023). It is also likely that other Mesoamerican centers at central landscape shrines, such as Chalcatzingo (Grove 1984), Chichen Itza (Folan et al. 2016; Ringle et al. 1998), and Monte Alban (Orr 2001), were established or at least initially populated by pilgrims who migrated there. These cases of pilgrimage, migration, ritual landscapes, and community unification can be understood by looking at the interrelated Mesoamerican concepts of movement, connectivity, and transformation.

### **Movement, Connectivity, and Transformation in Migration**

Focusing on population movement, people's connectivity to ritual landscapes, and community transformation provides a useful context for understanding pilgrimage and migration in Mesoamerica and other regions. Core concepts of movement, connectivity, and transformation in the cosmos and human lives explain why pilgrimage, people's interaction at landscape shrines, and population relocations occur at specific sites (Duwe and Preucel 2019). Anthropologists studying migration, place, and identity with Indigenous collaborators have learned that native peoples understand population movement as a natural phenomenon with religious connotations. They focus on connectivity with specific land features, their resident deities, and human societies associated with shrines as part of the process of experiencing change and maintaining world balance during movements or migration (Boone 1991; Chevalier and Sánchez Bain 2003; Duwe and Preucel 2019; Folan et al. 2016; Kantner 2011; Maffie 2014; Nelson and Strawhacker 2011; Orr 2001; Ruz 2009). Maya people equate movement with the path of the sun, moon, and stars as seen in their concepts of perpetual motion and cyclical renewal (Stanzione 2003; Stuart 2011). They replicated this cosmic motion, change, and rebirth through pilgrimages to community shrines around their population centers. The movements to and rituals at

these landscape shrines reinforce Indigenous connectivity to their lands, ancestors, families, and their future (Barabas 2006).

Movement in Mesoamerica is a natural part of the world and an intrinsic way of being and becoming (Chevalier and Sánchez Bain 2003; Duwe 2020; Duwe and Preucel 2019; Maffie 2014). Thus, migration replicates the perpetual movement of the cosmos, which remains in flux between states of balance and renewal. This all-encompassing motion explains the travels of heavenly bodies, god pilgrimages and migrations, seasonal changes, growth of plants and human bodies, culture change, and the relocation of human settlements. Constant movement allows for the transformation of societies to attain connectivity and renewal, as well as continuity and change (Clayton 2021; Nelson et al. 2014). People also move their settlements during times of transition caused by changing environmental and social factors that follow inherent cosmic motion change, leading to transformation and balance. Cultures from northern to southern Mesoamerica, including in the Maya area, believe that movement, emergence, and transformation are part of life, or “always becoming,” and thus are essential for people’s and community health and well-being (Chevalier and Sánchez Bain 2003; Duwe 2020:17–18). Migration on a “continuous path” is an important way of being that explains how a people originated, transformed their societies, and then connected with others to form communities in ancestral landscapes across Mesoamerica (Duwe and Preucel 2019; Stanzione 2003). Mesoamerican peoples have maintained their shared notions of cosmic movement permeating people’s lives, as viewed by Aztec people as *ollin* “movement-shift-transformation” (Maffie 2014) and highland Mayan as *jaloj-k'exoj* “physical change-transference-transformation” (Carlsen and Prechtel 1991). Because spiritual forces, ancestors, and deities move across the landscape in pilgrimages and migrations, people must follow similar actions (Boone 1991; Folan et al. 2016; Stanzione 2003). Q’eqchi’ and K’iche Maya people continue to walk to landscape shrines associated with their communities to preserve their ties with their land, ancestors, spiritual forces in the landscape, and community members (Wilson 1995).

Mesoamerican pilgrimage to ritual landscapes, like at Mensabak, reinforces peoples’ movement and spiritual connections to ancestral shrines, the cosmos, and community sanctuaries (Boone 1991; Duwe 2020:217; Folan et al. 2016). Landscape features are not just sacred places or important for people’s identity but are also directly tied to people through their histories and the presence of ancestors and gods with whom they have social relationships (Astor Aguilera 2010; Duwe 2020:23; Monaghan 1995). In Mesoamerica, all things—including landscapes, gods, people, and their communities—are connected through a unifying cosmic energy, like a woven textile (*teotl* for Aztec peoples or *ch’ul/k’uh* for Maya; Maffie 2014:22–30; Monaghan 1995; Pitarch 2010; Sandstrom and Effrein Sandstrom 2023). This energy is in constant transformation to states of balance and renewal. Ties to the landscape and the integration of communities are created through collective pilgrimage rituals at shrines, as we saw at Mensabak. Connectivity between human communities and their landscape is also created through trade, intermarriage, social relationships, and ritual movement (Beekman 2021; Kantner 2011:364–365). In this manner, connectivity between people, their communities, and spiritual forces in the landscape results in transformation, transition, and the achievement of balance (Nelson et al. 2014). Pilgrimage and migration in turn stem from this inherent movement and connectivity between the landscape and community.

### Conclusions: Pilgrimage, Migration, and Community Cohesion

Pilgrimage, migration, and the founding of settlements near landscape shrines have been important in Mesoamerica and particularly in the Maya area, as shown by the case studies described in this article. Aztec and Maya myths of pilgrimage and migration from the Late Postclassic to the colonial period can be contextualized within Indigenous beliefs and practices around universal movement, connectivity, and transformation to achieve balance and renewal. Connectivity and transformation follow movement to ritual landscapes and balance in migrants’ new settlements and community shrines. In the case of Mensabak, Late Postclassic to colonial period Maya pilgrims and perhaps Aztec traders visited the island Mirador Mountain shrine and likely saw pilgrimage and migration here as a return to an Aztlan-like origin place. Subsequently, people created ties with each other, the landscape, and resident

deities. During that time, Maya lineages moved to Mensabak and rapidly created separate settlements. As I discussed, archaeologists see this type of settlement pattern as crucial evidence for migration. Collective shrine rituals established ties to ancestors and deities to bring community protection and prosperity for the growing population.

Migrations to Mensabak and other areas demonstrate the importance of ritual landscapes and religion for migrating populations, as in the other Mesoamerican cultures described earlier. The pilgrimage shrines at the cliffs, caves, and on Mirador Mountain initially attracted Maya worshipers who traveled to Mensabak and then settled there, rather than at other lakes and sites. The pilgrimages provided important information about this area and established local social ties for migrants. The pilgrims chose Mensabak over other sites because of its prominent ritual landscapes where resident deities could be contacted for protection and renewal. Mirador Mountain became a symbol for community, polity, and prosperity for migrant Maya, like the *altepétl* mountain of water, sustenance, spiritual forces, and community identity in Mesoamerican mythology and history (Broda 2001; Schroeder 2019). The several settlements created by Late Postclassic and colonial period Maya migrants at Mensabak likely indicate that migrating waves of lineages and families moved to the area. The Maya community that grew at Mensabak performed rituals together at the landscape shrines to communicate with resident deities. Travel among shrines and rites within them allowed newcomers to establish connective ties with spiritual forces in the landscape, thus helping them cope with changes in their lives following migration. The rituals also allowed people to create connections with their new lands and other migrants, forming a cohesive community identity.

The dynamics of migration and pilgrimage to ritual landscapes at Mensabak can be compared to some population movements and community formation in other parts of the world, such as Mecca (McCorriston 2011), which grew as settlements around shrines over time. Pilgrimage to ritual landscapes provides valuable information on a receiving area's topography, population, and economic potential for future migrants. Based on what they learn, people decide to migrate to where they have made social, religious, and economic connections. Hence, pilgrimage and religious pull factors lead to human migrations in addition to the often-considered economic and political push factors. The findings help explain why people select specific places over others, when certain populations migrate, why some settlements grow near landscape shrines, and how communities connect and prosper around ritual centers in different parts of the world.

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