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SPECIAL SECTION: THE PRECERAMIC AND EARLY CERAMIC PERIODS IN BELIZE AND THE CENTRAL MAYA LOWLANDS

## INTRODUCTION

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The Classic and Postclassic periods of Mesoamerica are well-documented archaeologically, with numerous excavations of abundant and spectacular remains, many of which are visible on the landscape and readily accessible. What happens when one wants to discover more about preceramic remains that represent the earliest human occupations and the beginnings of complex societies? The obstacles are several and varied, yet many researchers throughout Mesoamerica have risen to meet such challenges. In this Special Section, 20 authors present their latest findings on “The Preceramic and Early Ceramic Periods in Belize and the Central Maya Lowlands.” While the focus is on one area of Mesoamerica, larger anthropological questions are addressed that archaeologists face across the world. Many different methods and analyses illustrate the productivity of multi-pronged approaches to studying Late Pleistocene, Early Holocene, and Later Holocene contexts.

As coordinators, **W. James Stemp** and **Jaime J. Awe** assembled eight articles, including their introduction with **Joyce Marcus**, **Christophe Helmke**, and **Lauren A. Sullivan**, to gather together some of the most recent explorations that inform us about who the early Maya were and from where they came. It is not surprising that research into this seminal time period has increased substantially and builds on the solid foundation of earlier work. The wider impact of these findings for Mesoamerica is apparent. Material culture and linguistics are instrumental in defining and refining critical thresholds of culture change and expression.

**Keith M. Prufer**, **Mark Robinson**, and **Douglass J. Kennett** discuss the “Terminal Pleistocene through Middle Holocene Occupations in Southeastern Mesoamerica: Linking Ecology and Culture in the Context of Neotropical Foragers and Early Farmers.” Their work in rock shelters serves as the foundation for understanding broad patterns and local adaptations of early occupants. Using artifacts, palaeobotanical remains, and human remains, the shift in resource exploitation is documented, as well as the cultural ties to North and South America. Changing environmental conditions were met with innovation, as evidenced through the creation of different tool types, a pattern globally documented for the end of the Pleistocene. Inhabitants excelled at foraging and incorporated domesticates that became the cornerstone of agriculture in Mesoamerica.

In the third article, **Robert M. Rosenswig** offers “Opinions on the Lowland Maya Late Archaic Period with Some Evidence from Northern Belize.” He focuses on the success of the foraging-horticultural way of life and its persistence in the Maya Lowlands

as a means to understand why inhabitants maintained this relationship longer than in other parts of Mesoamerica. Productive comparisons between the Soconusco region and northern Belize highlight the varied adaptations, especially during the Late Archaic. Ultimate and proximate causes considered together frame anthropological explanations of change that archaeologists consider in many different contexts.

The recovery of human remains in tropical environments can be notoriously difficult, and even more so from thousands of years ago. In “Before the Maya: A Review of Paleindian and Archaic Human Skeletons Found in the Maya Region,” **Gabriel D. Wrobel**, **Julie A. Hoggarth**, and **Aubree Marshall** provide a state-of-the-art evaluation of the remains of early humans from submerged cave and rock-shelter contexts. Thanks to investigations by personnel from Mexico’s Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH), ten individuals have been recovered. The authors consider that dating of such early remains can be problematical, especially those that come from submerged contexts. The sample size of humans from the Late Pleistocene and Early Holocene is expected to increase as other projects aim to recover early humans. The authors rightly caution, however, that the diversity of adaptations is not fully represented by such small samples.

In the fifth article of this Special Section, **Clarissa Cagnato** employs paleoethnobotanical and chemical residue analyses in her article titled “Gathering and Sowing across the Central Maya Lowlands: A Review of Plant Use by Preceramic People and the Early to Middle Preclassic Maya.” Changes in subsistence are documented through time, though Cagnato cautions that Archaic and Preclassic peoples likely incorporated a wider range of species in their diets than what is represented from microbotanicals, macrobotanicals, or chemical residues. Cagnato rightly urges researchers to regularly incorporate paleoethnobotanical studies to better determine ancient diets, food preparations, and subsistence, and relate these patterns to local and broad lifeways. Making the most of the archaeological record is critical.

“The Origins and Identification of the Early Maya from Colha and Northern Belize” are considered by **Fred A. Valdez Jr.**, **Lauren A. Sullivan**, **Palma J. Buttles**, and **Luisa Aebersold**. The detection of aceramic populations is essential for knowing about Maya beginnings, and few other regions in the Lowlands offer such long histories of inquiries that help to answer the question: “Just who were the earliest Maya?” A difficult issue for any archaeologist is to identify ethnic markers through material culture

that are linked with cultural practices. Solid evidence and evaluation from legacy data and more recent excavations build a framework upon which we can attempt to make headway in resolving questions of origins and identity. While it is unrealistic to think that a single site or deposit could easily answer profound questions, the authors have brought us closer to understanding who the Maya were and from where they came.

The seventh article of this special section is by **Jaime J. Awe, Claire E. Ebert, W. James Stemp, M. Kathryn Brown, Lauren A. Sullivan, and James F. Garber** and focuses on the “Lowland Maya Genesis: The Late Archaic to Late Early Formative Transition in the Upper Belize River Valley.” The authors synthesize the available data to present a coherent picture of how and when early peoples settled in Western Belize and came to be identified as the Maya. Innovations in pottery and stone tools are the hallmark of this critical time period, as well as the remains of settled communities, agriculture, trade items, and shared symbols. The authors provide a solid basis upon which much-needed future research into this transitory time period can be based.

**Gabriel D. Wrobel, Raúl Alejandro López Pérez, and Claire E. Ebert** conclude the Special Section by writing about “Life and Death among the Earliest Maya: A Review of Early and Middle Preclassic Burials from the Maya World.” The authors lament that most of what we know about the Maya from a bioarchaeological perspective comes from Classic period burials, leaving a gap in our knowledge previous to the rise of state-level societies in the Maya Lowlands. They combed the literature to produce a compendium of 398 individuals representing 40 sites and variation in

mortuary behaviors. The results of this study provide a major effort in obtaining a better understanding of the Preclassic through the remains of the people who lived during that time. As more burials are recovered from projects that specifically explore Preclassic contexts and newer methods are employed, we can anticipate an even more robust reconstruction of this time period.

Taken together, the articles in this Special Section greatly enrich our understanding and knowledge of Paleoindian, Archaic, and Preclassic populations, specifically in Belize, and generally in the Maya Lowlands and Mesoamerica. These critical time periods have not been as well-documented as later ones, but recent projects and the application of a wide range of methods make the events of the distant past more accessible to the archaeologist. The authors’ contributions extend beyond Maya studies, or even Mesoamerica, as they examine anthropological matters of climate change, environmental adaptations, origins of agriculture, ethnic identity, changes in technology and ideology, the rise of complex societies, increases in population density, and other widely observed phenomena in the archaeological record across the globe. In the end, all the articles highlight the fact that the transition from Archaic hunter-fisher-foragers to Preclassic period agrarian communities represents one of the most significant times in the development of Lowland Maya culture, and that it is during this seminal period of development that many of the cultural traditions of Maya civilization were first established.

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