

THE INFLECTION POINTS IN FORMATIVE MAYA HISTORY: THE VIEW FROM CHAMPOTÓN, CAMPECHE, MEXICO

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Abstract

This study evaluates the degree of correspondence between chronological frameworks implemented in Maya studies and current archaeological evidence, focusing on dynamics in the Preclassic period in the Champotón River drainage, Campeche, Mexico. The earliest ceramics documented in Champotón, dating to the early facet of the Middle Preclassic, were part of a regional tradition that shared decorative modes with contemporary complexes across Mesoamerica. The transition between the early and late facets of the Middle Preclassic was an era of abrupt change, with communities in Champotón participating in the first widespread autochthonous material culture horizon of the Maya Lowlands. The ensuing centuries would be characterized by conservatism and growth, with spatial continuity in settlement locations and homogeneity in material culture through the Late Preclassic. These historical dynamics are not unique to coastal Campeche, but were embedded within broader historical developments during the Middle Preclassic period in the Maya Lowlands. Instead of forcing new evidence into an incongruent chronological framework, this article proposes a revision to the traditional periodization used in the Maya Lowlands.

Recent decades have witnessed profound changes in archaeological knowledge of the ancestral Maya past, with particularly notable empirical advancements in our understanding of the initial adoption of ceramics, sedentism, and agricultural lifeways (Estrada-Belli 2010; Lohse 2010, 2022; Traxler and Sharer 2016; Walker 2022). New evidence indicates that the earliest documented sedentary communities were integrated into an early pan-Mesoamerican interaction sphere by the beginning of the first millennium B.C. (Cheetham 2005; Cheetham et al. 2002; Clark and Cheetham 2002; Rosenswig 2011, 2016). By the sixth century B.C., this tradition would be replaced by a distinctively Maya material culture horizon that would spread across most of the Maya Lowlands (Estrada-Belli 2010; Traxler and Sharer 2016). This emergent autochthonous tradition, reflected in ceramics, art, and architecture, was characterized by homogeneity, conservatism, and a long temporal span.

New data have served to underscore some fundamental shortcomings in the chronological frameworks we use to understand the ancestral Maya past. The variant of the Mesoamerican chronology used in the Maya area was first developed as an evolutionary typology untethered to absolute dates and applicable to the entire western hemisphere (Table 1; Phillips and Willey 1953; Willey and Phillips 1955, 1958). The nature of this chronological framework gradually metamorphosed from a developmental sequence into a static timeline with fixed intervals. Over the course of seven decades as the standard temporal nomenclature in Maya studies, there have been only minor revisions to this chronology to accommodate new evidence. This article examines the nature and development of this conceptual framework, and its applicability in a specific case study from coastal Campeche.

Regional settlement survey in the Champotón River drainage in central Campeche documented three millennia of human occupation, crosscut by episodes of major change in political affiliation, economic organization, and human-environmental interactions. The

earliest sedentary communities in the Champotón region produced and consumed pottery that was a participant within an early pan-Mesoamerican stylistic horizon. The Ch'ok complex has been documented in small frequencies in multiple sites in the Champotón River drainage, with a notable pattern of intraregional variability. The transition to a radically different ceramic tradition unfolded during the sixth to seventh centuries B.C.: the traditional boundary between the early and late facets of the Middle Preclassic period. The ensuing Ahal complex represents a major change in patterns of ceramic influence, with a shift from pan-Mesoamerican stylistic influences toward full participation in the earliest autochthonous material culture tradition that is uniquely Maya in character. The Mamom and ensuing Chicanel spheres were part of a waxy-ware tradition with remarkable persistence over at least eight centuries, appearing in consistent form across most of the Maya Lowlands. This era was marked by conservatism and gradual growth.

This timeline is an awkward fit within the current iteration of the Mesoamerican chronological framework. This study highlights some shortcomings in the version of the Mesoamerican chronology currently implemented for archaeological research in the Maya Lowlands, particularly incongruences between the original purposes of this framework and its usage in contemporary research. Instead of forcing new data into a largely outdated chronological framework, the goal of this article is to refocus attention on disjunctions in the archaeological record that reflect historical inflection points. This study highlights a broader need for major revisions in the temporal heuristics we employ to understand the Maya past.

TEMPORAL THEORY AND FRAMEWORKS FOR UNDERSTANDING THE ANCESTRAL MAYA PAST

What do we mean when we say “Maya?” At the time of Spanish contact, the area we now refer to as the Maya Lowlands was an

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Table 1. Developmental stages outlined by Willey and Phillips (Phillips and Willey 1953; Willey and Phillips 1955, 1958). This framework was originally created as a developmental sequence untethered to absolute dates. Typological: Absolute criteria pertain to attributes that are empirically evident, such as the appearance of specific technologies or diagnostic artifacts. Configurational: Relative criteria include characteristics based on political/social organization, or more subjective criteria that involve aesthetic judgements or diachronic contrasts (e.g., religious/secular, ritualistic/militaristic).

Stage	Criteria	Defining Attributes	Diagnostics
Postclassic/Decadent	Configurational/Relative	Secular states, urbanism, militarism, and initial appearance of expansionist empires	Nucleated cities, non-religious leadership, “international” styles of visual culture
Classic/Florescent	Configurational/Relative	Theocratic states, religious and intellectual achievements, appearance of “high civilization”	Aesthetic attributes (art and architecture) of public monuments
Formative/Preclassic	Typological/Absolute	Full adoption of sedentism and agricultural subsistence systems	Sedentism, pottery use, appearance of domesticates
Preformative	Typological/Absolute	Transitional stage, increasing sedentism and reliance on agriculture; introduction of formative traits, but not full adoption	Seasonal sedentism, ceremonial centers, initial appearance of domesticates
Archaic	Typological/Absolute	Regionalized broad-spectrum hunter-gatherer subsistence	Groundstone technology
Early Lithic	Typological/Absolute	Hunter-gatherer subsistence focused on big-game hunting	Large chipped-stone points, particularly fluted points

expansive zone linked by a common set of languages, material culture, ideology, and lifeways. Archaeological and epigraphic evidence indicates that these characteristics extend back at least into the Classic period (Houston and Martin 2016; Houston et al. 2000). However, it is important to remember that the concept of “Maya civilization” is an etic anthropological construct. Ethnohistoric and epigraphic evidence indicate more intersectional conceptualizations of identity, with political, factional, and class distinctions holding greater social relevance (Hendon 1999, 2002; Pugh 2009; Rice and Rice 2009; Tokovinine 2013). Our understanding of these dynamics is even more fragmentary for eras pre-dating the textual record.

The concept of “Mayaness” emerged from colonial social dynamics and became a meaningful ethnonym following the crystallization of anthropology as an academic discipline during the twentieth century. The concept derives from the theoretical perspective of culture history, a trait-based approach to anthropology embodied within Boasian historical particularism (Trigger 2006:211–311). This anthropological paradigm was characterized by a taxonomic approach to the study of human cultural diversity, with delineation of cultural groups based on shared attributes. The incorporation of this approach into archaeological research focused on the temporal and spatial delimitation of units based on shared attributes of material culture. Childe (1950:2) defined the “archaeological culture” by co-occurrence of traits, or “arbitrary peculiarities of implements, weapons, ornaments, houses, burial rites, and ritual objects ... assumed to be the concrete expressions of the common social traditions that bind together a people.” The concept of the “Maya” as a cultural tradition derives from this approach, combining both social (shared languages, worldviews, and ways of life) and material culture attributes (pottery, tools, art, and architecture). In some regions the past was envisioned as a sequence of distinct material culture traditions (e.g., a broader Woodland tradition divided into distinct archaeological cultures: Adena, Hopewell, Fort Ancient, etc.). In contrast, the ancestral Maya past is viewed as a single developmental sequence spanning three millennia. The rationale for selecting between temporal sequences of cultures or a unified historical tradition was often arbitrary, yet has critical repercussions in the ways we envision the past.

In the wake of calls for archaeology to address topics of greater social relevance (Kluckhohn 1940; Taylor 1948), Willey and

Phillips undertook the ambitious task of defining the central conceptual frameworks for archaeological practice as well as a model of cultural change (Phillips and Willey 1953; Willey and Phillips 1955, 1958). Drawing on neo-evolutionary and ecological perspectives, explicit emphasis was placed on the delimitation not of traits, but of processes of cultural development. The Willey/Phillips chronology consisted of six stages: Early Lithic, Archaic, Preformative, Formative, Classic, and Postclassic (Table 1). This developmental scheme became the foundation of Mesoamerican chronologies, with later stages connected to ceramic sequences following the adoption of the type-variety approach (Smith and Gifford 1966).

Decoupling developmental stages from interval time was a central element of the Willey/Phillips scheme. As their evolutionary framework was intended to be applicable for the entire western hemisphere, it was independent of any fixed intervals of time. This approach was historically important because it established cultural evolution as the dominant paradigm in American archaeology, setting the stage for further theoretical and methodological shifts in the processual era (Leventhal and Erdman Cornavaca 2007; Trigger 2006). In the ensuing generations, it was adopted as the standard temporal heuristic in Mesoamerican studies.

Over time the temporal boundaries of stages within the Mesoamerican chronology became fixed and took on a fundamentally different character: what Willey and Phillips defined as *periods*. Now coupled to specific spans of time, these temporal units continued to be implemented despite increasing incongruence between their original defining attributes and empirical evidence. For instance, there is broad consensus that many distinctive “Classic Maya” attributes originated no later than the Late Preclassic *period*. As a developmental chronology, such new empirical findings should necessitate modification of the temporal placement of the stage. In current usage, these terms are little more than shared vocabulary used to refer to fixed temporal intervals.

The shift from a chronological framework comprised of developmental stages to a fundamentally different set of heuristics consisting of periods with fixed temporal boundaries was gradual, with no corresponding changes in nomenclature. Yet the corresponding terminology retained the original developmental baggage, entailing

not just evolutionary but often moral overtones (Joyce 2000). We tend to view the Preclassic period through a teleological lens, comprising developments along a pathway to the (often fetishized) Classic florescence (Webster 2006). Likewise, instead of “secular, urban, mercantile, and militaristic,” the Postclassic period was portrayed as unenlightened and morally deficient (i.e., “decadent”). Despite widespread rejection of neo-evolutionary models, our basic framework for thinking about time is still based on a developmental typology that is both embedded in neo-evolutionary paradigms and increasingly inconsistent with empirical evidence.

Concurrent with the gradual metamorphosis of the Mesoamerican chronology, the late twentieth century witnessed vigorous debates and theory building outside Maya studies focused on new approaches to archaeological chronologies (Bailey 1983; Binford 1981; Knapp 1992; Plog 1974; Schiffer 1985). These concerns link archaeology with other historical sciences that deal with temporal scales beyond a human lifetime. Chronological frameworks based on hierarchies of temporal units—best embodied in the Annales approach in history (Braudel 1980)—hold obvious archaeological relevance (Knapp 1992). Braudel identified a hierarchy of phenomena that exist at different temporal scales: event, conjuncture, and *longue durée*. Events concern episodes or occurrences which form the basic subject matter of mainstream history: people, battles, and treaties. Conjunctures consist of processes that operate at an intermediate temporal scale, ranging from shorter-term cycles (wars, market cycles) to long-term phenomena (demographic trends or geopolitical and economic reorganizations). Finally, phenomena within the *longue durée* include long-term structural relationships that condition more dynamic processes at shorter temporal scales.

Research in historical ecology by Butzer (1982) identified analogous rhythms of systemic change with variable temporalities: adaptive adjustments, modifications, and transformations. Adaptive adjustments consist of short-term economic and social dynamics that exist within the frame of a human lifetime, corresponding to events and short-term conjunctures in the parlance of Braudel. Adaptive modifications consist of major change in human adaptive strategies, such as agricultural intensification, demographic movements, and political cycling. These correspond with Braudel’s longer-term conjunctures and *longue durée*. Finally, adaptive transformations exist on a temporal scale beyond Braudel’s framework, describing fundamental human adaptive modes, such as the development of agriculture or industrialization. This perspective mirrors new approaches in socio-ecological systems theory, particularly theories of adaptive change (Gunderson and Holling 2002). A common feature of these new frameworks is a hierarchy of nested temporal scales.

The main contribution of archaeology to the broader social and historical sciences is time depth. Thus, chronology theory holds particular relevance in the development of archaeological frameworks that can integrate time frames far beyond a lifetime (what Braudel referred to as “unconscious history”), with intermediate and short-term dynamics that relate more directly to historical eras and lived human experiences. Nested temporal frameworks can best accommodate a wide range of phenomena: events and short-term conjunctures that are the realm of history and text-aided archaeology; dynamics that operate on a scale comparable to ceramic phases (100–200 years); and long-term adaptive processes and socio-ecological regimes with temporalities measurable in centuries or millennia. Linking archaeological models of change with conceptual frameworks from complex systems approaches, transitions

between periods are often defined by nonlinear change and threshold behavior, with “tipping points” between major eras of history marked by the emergence of new sets of political, economic, social or human-environmental interactions (Meyer and Crumley 2012). Indeed, accommodation of phenomena with variable temporalities is a necessity for any effective chronology. The underlying goal of any chronological framework is to help us make sense of the past by delimiting periods defined by key historical developments: the pivot points or transitions that define eras.

THE INITIAL CERAMIC COMPLEXES IN THE MAYA LOWLANDS

Recent studies provide a nuanced view of the initial appearance of distinctively Formative cultural traits in the Maya Lowlands (Brown and Bey 2018; Clark et al. 2001; Estrada-Belli 2010; Freidel et al. 2017; Rosenswig 2010; Traxler and Sharer 2016; Walker 2022). The period between 1100 and 1000 B.C. is emerging as a temporal threshold for the adoption of pottery, with studies from across the Maya Lowlands documenting ceramic complexes that pre-date the widespread Mamom ceramic sphere (Figure 1; Walker 2022). Pre-Mamom complexes were initially documented at Altar de Sacrificios (Adams 1971), Ceibal (Sabloff 1975), Barton Ramie (Gifford 1976), the Peten Lakes (Rice 1976), Komchen (Andrews V 1988), Cuello (Hammond 1991), and Tikal (Culbert 1993, 2003). The initial pottery from Champotón pertained to one of several highly regionalized ceramic spheres—including the Cunil, Eb, Swasey, Ek, and Xe spheres—linked by participation in a broader pan-Mesoamerican stylistic, iconographic, and ideological system (Figure 1).

The Xe sphere of the Pasión River is the best-documented pre-Mamom ceramic tradition in the Maya area. The earliest ceramic complexes from Altar de Sacrificios (Adams 1971) and Ceibal (Sabloff 1975) are characterized by matte-slipped red, white, and black serving vessels with dichrome and post-slipped incised decorative motifs. Andrews V (1990) noted similarities between Xe and contemporaneous Isthmian ceramics in slip characteristics (dull matte color, powdery and easily eroded surfaces, and red-on-white decoration), pastes (generally coarse-grained, with sand or ash temper), and vessel form repertoire.

Sabloff (1975:48–49) noted temporal changes in Xe sphere ceramics, with a shift from early dull, dark, and matte red slips toward lighter and glossier redwares and decreasing frequency of white-slipped ceramics. Recent research at Ceibal has led to significant refinement of the original ceramic typology, including identification of three facets of the Real (Xe) complex from precisely dated contexts (Castellanos and Foias 2017; Inomata et al. 2013, 2015). The Real 1 phase (1000–850 B.C.) is characterized by high frequencies of diagnostic matte white-slipped ceramics and a simplified form repertoire (see summary in Castellanos and Foias 2017). The ensuing Real 2 phase (850–800 B.C.) is defined by decreasing frequencies of white-slipped ceramics and new forms, including wide, everted bowls. Real 3 (800–700 B.C.) is marked by red- and black-slipped pottery with glossier slips, pre-slip incised designs, grooved rims, and chamfering. Xe pottery is the closest analog to contemporary pottery at Champotón, with these patterns of temporal variability corresponding to intra-regional patterns noted at the Ch’ok complex (discussed further below).

The Central and Eastern Maya Lowlands—the zone encompassing the northern and central Peten in Guatemala and adjacent areas of the upper Belize River Valley—is home to multiple sites with documented Middle Formative ceramic complexes. The Cunil

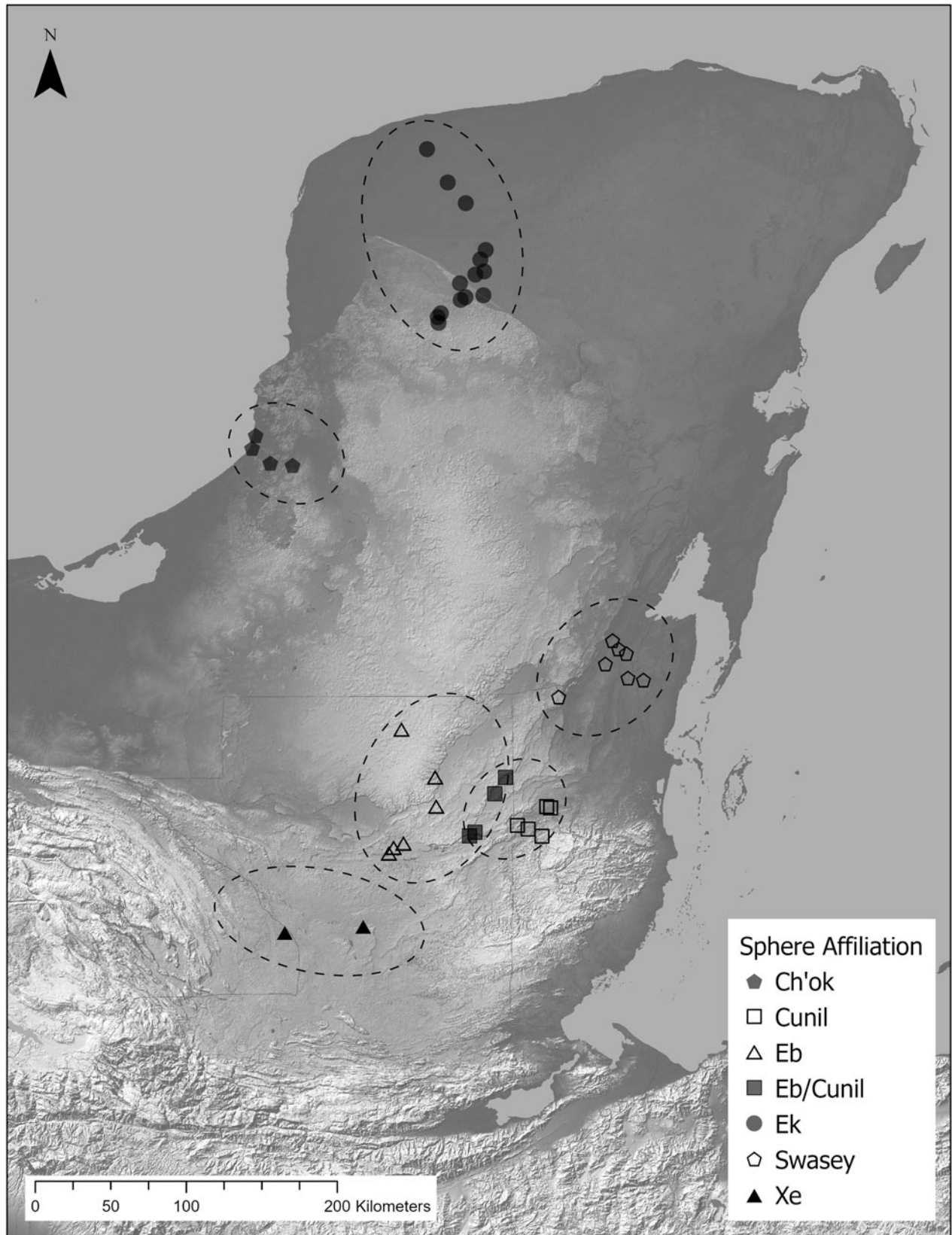


Figure 1. Early Middle Formative ceramic spheres in the Maya area. Cartography by the author using NASA SRTM base map.

tradition was initially documented at the site of Cahal Pech (Awe 1992; Sullivan et al. 2009), part of a regional sphere in western Belize that includes Blackman Eddy, Xunantunich, Pacbitun, and Barton Ramie (Cheetham 2005; Cheetham et al. 2002; Clark and Cheetham 2002; Garber and Awe 2009; Garber et al. 2002, 2004; Healy et al. 2004; Sullivan and Awe 2013; Sullivan et al. 2009). Cunil shares common typological and form repertoires with the Eb tradition documented at Tikal, Uaxactun, Holmul, Cival, Nakbe, and the Peten Lakes region (Callaghan and Neivens de Estrada 2016; Castellanos and Foias 2017; Cheetham 2005; Clark and Cheetham 2002; Culbert 1979, 1993; Hansen 2005; Moriarti 2012:201–205; Neivens de Estrada 2014; Rice 1976). Ceramic assemblages from Holmul, Guatemala, exhibit a greater degree of ware and type diversity, including a mix of modes common in Cunil and Eb (Callaghan and Neivens de Estrada 2016; Neivens de Estrada 2014). There is a lack of consensus on the relationship between the Eb and Cunil traditions (Ball and Taschek 2003; Castellanos and Foias 2017; Neivens de Estrada 2014). Given the clear overlaps in type descriptions from primary red, white/cream, and black slipped groups in both spheres, this could reflect either a unified Cunil/Eb sphere or separate spheres with clinal differences between eastern and western zones (see Figure 1).

A very different ceramic tradition has been documented in northern Belize. The Swasey sphere includes the Swasey/Bladen complexes first documented at Cuello and identified at Colha, Nohmul, Blue Creek, Pulltrouser Swamp, and other sites in northern Belize (Andrews V and Hammond 1990; Fry 1989; Hammond 1991; Kosakowski 1987; Kosakowski and Pring 1998; Levi 1993; Lohse 2010; Pring 1977). Swasey redwares lack the characteristic dull matte slips of other contemporary pottery traditions, with glossy surface textures similar to—and likely predecessors of—late Middle Formative Mamom ceramics. In contrast to the sharp break between early and late Middle Formative pottery documented in other regions, the continuity in northern Belize has led several to argue that this is the first clearly identifiable “Maya” material culture tradition (Andrews V 1990; Kosakowski and Pring 1998:64).

The earliest pottery from the Northern Lowlands and Puuc Hills forms another regional sphere. The Ek complex was initially documented at Komchen (Andrews V 1988, 1990), and later at multiple sites in northwest Yucatan and the Bolonchen region in the northeast Puuc Hills (Andrews V and Bey III 2022; Andrews V et al. 2018; Cruz 2010). These materials differ from southern counterparts in a narrower repertoire of slip colors and combinations. Decorative modes are characterized by an extensive focus on elaborate post-slip incised decoration. As in Xe, Eb, and Cunil, there is a sharp break in ceramic traditions between the early and late Middle Formative period.

While the earliest ceramic traditions in the Maya area are regionalized and typologically distinctive (Walker 2022), they reflect participation in a symbolic and iconographic system that was pan-Mesoamerican in scale. These broad stylistic similarities transcend localized production spheres and industries, including:

- dull matte slips, typically red, white, orange, and black, in rough order of commonality;
- red-on-white or red-on-cream dichromes;
- unslipped (sometimes burnished) serving vessels;
- elaborate post-slip incised geometric designs;
- ash, sand, and micaceous inclusions;
- incised iconography with pan-Mesoamerican distribution, including cleft, avian, serpent, “flame eyebrow,” lightning, cross, shark tooth, and music bracket motifs (see expanded discussion in Cheetham 2005).

Based on these common characteristics, Cheetham and colleagues (Cheetham 2005; Cheetham et al. 2002; Clark and Cheetham 2002) have argued for a “Cunil Horizon” linking the Xe, Eb, and Cunil spheres. Yet these modes do not appear uniformly in different participant complexes, but instead constitute unique local amalgamations of broadly shared attributes.

Although the dating of the early Middle Formative ceramic complexes has been the topic of some debate (Andrews V and Hammond 1990; Hammond 1977, 1991; Kosakowski 1987; Kosakowski and Pring 1998), synthesis of the available evidence seem to be converging on a common chronology. Recent research at the site of Aguada Fénix in the western periphery of the Maya area revealed evidence for ceramic use by 1200 B.C. and the development of major public architecture by 1000 B.C. (Inomata 2019). Initial reports indicate that the earliest pottery from Aguada Fénix demonstrates strong similarities with slightly later Xe ceramics from Ceibal. Similar pottery appears in other parts of the Maya Lowlands around 1000 B.C. (Inomata et al. 2015; Lohse 2010, 2022; Walker 2022). The end of these traditions is more variable, with either a continuous developmental trajectory into Mamom sphere ceramics or (more commonly) abrupt replacement sometime around 700–600 B.C.

The high degree of variability between ceramic complexes reflects regionalized spheres linked by shared stylistic and iconographic modes that were widespread during the early part of the Middle Formative. This pattern of regionalized ceramic spheres seems most consistent with a relatively balkanized political and economic landscape of loosely connected communities. The seven spheres discussed above (Figure 1) likely reflect relatively small-scale networks of producers with distinctive practices, norms, and technologies. However, these spheres share important similarities—particularly decorative modes—that reflect participation in a broader pan-Mesoamerican system of interaction. The lack of standardization both at the regional scale and across the Maya area is a notable contrast to the more inclusive and homogeneous Mamom and Chicanel spheres that emerge in ensuing periods.

REGIONAL RESEARCH IN THE CHAMPOTÓN RIVER DRAINAGE

The Champotón Regional Settlement Survey (CRSS) documented political, economic, social, and environmental dynamics within long-term cycles of adaptive change in the Champotón River drainage (Ek 2012a, 2012b, 2015, 2016, 2022). The initial phase of the project (2003–2011) was regional in scope, incorporating reconnaissance, intensive survey, and test excavations. In total, 13 pre-Hispanic centers were documented, with intensive surface survey and testing in seven sites (Figure 2). Test excavations generated samples of domestic refuse from residential contexts to reconstruct patterns of political and economic change. The CRSS research complemented earlier investigations undertaken by the Universidad Autónoma de Campeche (UAC) in monumental constructions within the modern city of Champotón (Folan et al. 2002, 2003, 2004, 2007, 2013; Forsyth 2004, 2008, 2012, 2019; Gómez Cobá et al. 2003; Götz 2006, 2008; Gunn and Folan 2000; Hurtado Cen et al. 2005, 2007).

Ceramic samples from 13 sites—a total of 261 surface collections and 99 test excavations—were analyzed and classified within the Type-Variety system (Tables 2 and 3). The basic framework for this analysis was based on the ceramic chronology developed by Donald Forsyth in his analysis of ceramic materials excavated by

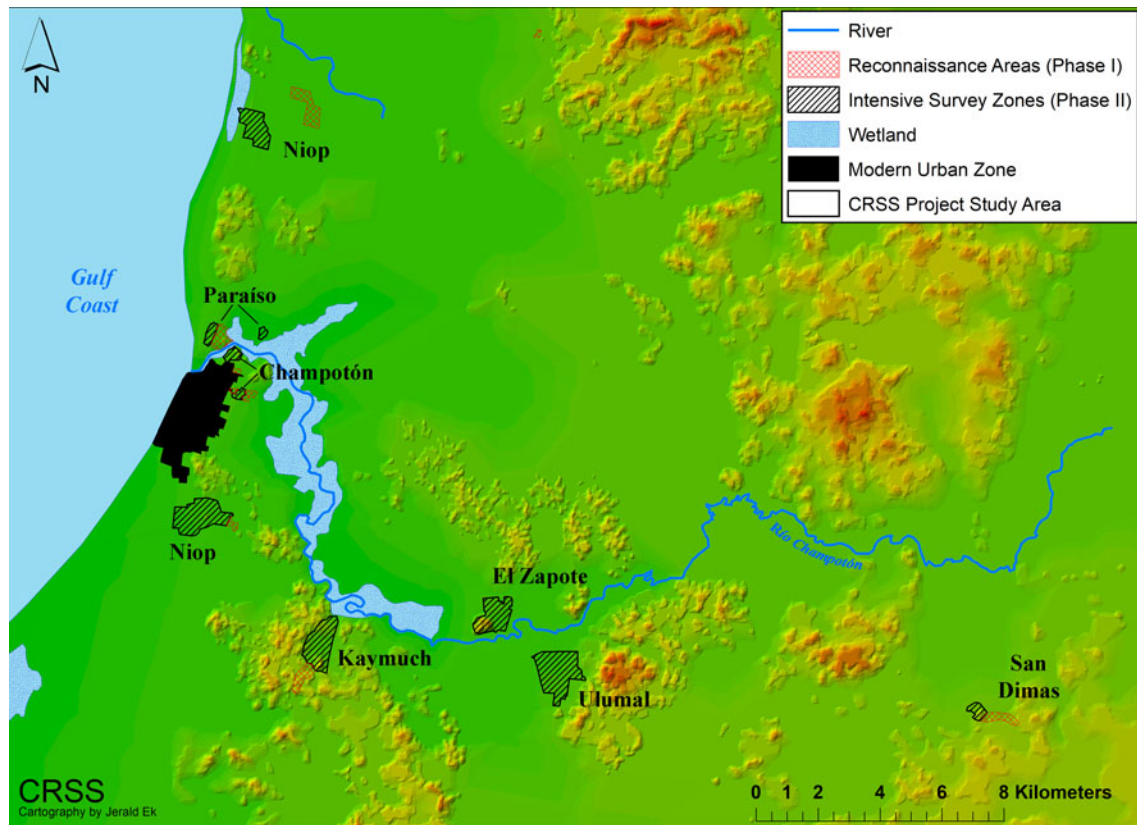


Figure 2. Champotón Regional Settlement Survey project study area, with Phase I Reconnaissance and Phase 2/3 Full Coverage Survey and Testing zones. Map by the author.

the UAC's Proyecto Champotón (Figure 3; Forsyth 2004, 2012, 2019). The CRSS ceramic assemblage was analyzed and classified by Jerald Ek, Wilberth Cruz Alvarado, Josalyn Ferguson, Matthew Sargis, and Sean O'Brien, with assistance from Donald Forsyth (Ek 2012a, 2012b, 2015, 2016; Ek and Cruz Alvarado 2010). While regional occupations were previously viewed as limited to the Postclassic and Historic periods (Eaton and Ball 1978; Ruz Lhullier 1969), the CRSS documented a much longer history of human settlement in the Champotón River drainage. A serendipitous result of the project was documentation of extensive Preclassic occupations in all the areas studied by the project, comprising three distinct ceramic complexes: Ch'ok, Ahal, and Pasaj.

THE EARLIEST CERAMICS IN THE CHAMPOTÓN RIVER DRAINAGE

The earliest evidence of sedentism and pottery production in the Champotón region is associated with the Ch'ok complex (Table 4). Ch'ok shares broad modal similarities with contemporary ceramic traditions in the Maya Lowlands, including dull matte-slipped wares, incised post-fire geometric motifs, red/white dichromes, and some basic form modes. This complex was one of several regionalized and distinctive small-scale production and distribution spheres that appeared during the early facet of the Middle Preclassic period (1000–600 B.C.; see Figure 1).

Table 2. Sample sizes for ceramic assemblages from the Champotón Regional Settlement Survey. This assemblage was generated from surface collections (SC) and excavation units (EU) from Phase II and Phase III sites in the Champotón River drainage between 2003 and 2009. Stratigraphic (Strat.) contexts consist of documented strata from excavation units.

Site Name	Surface Collections	Excavation Units	Strat. Contexts	SC Sherd Count	EU Sherd Count	Total Sherd Count
Champotón/Paraiso	23	17	42	1,855	10,280	12,135
El Zapote	14	10	23	822	4,391	5,213
Kaymúch	3	8	18	63	1,483	1,546
Niopo	23	23	87	1,182	20,954	22,136
Rancho Potrero Grande	40	8	24	3,177	1,990	5,167
San Dimas	1	6	29	30	5,872	5,902
Ulumal	75	27	107	4,695	19,521	24,216
Total	179	99	330	11,824	64,491	76,315

Table 3. Percentages of each ceramic complex within the total assemblages from each of the seven Phase III research loci. Total percentage for each loci adds up to approximately 100%. Ch'ok complex (Champotón 1A); Ahal complex (Champotón 1B); Mixed/Transitional Pasaj/Ahal; Pasaj complex(Champotón 2); Tapal (Champotón 3); Jukub' (Champotón 4, 5, and 6); Chumul (Champotón 7); and Hulel (Champotón 8).

	Ch'ok	Ahal	Pasaj/Ahal	Pasaj	Tapal	Jukub'	Chumul	Hulel
Champotón (Potrerito)	0%	1%	0%	5%	0%	2%	92%	0%
Champotón (Paraíso)	3%	10%	5%	13%	0%	3%	67%	0%
Champotón (Rancho San Carlos)	2%	1%	6%	21%	7%	45%	18%	0%
Rancho Potrero Grande	0%	1%	2%	18%	1%	31%	48%	0%
Ulumal	1%	3%	6%	10%	1%	79%	1%	0%
Niop	0%	12%	12%	24%	5%	35%	11%	1%
Kaymuch	0%	12%	4%	10%	2%	13%	60%	0%
El Zapote	0%	4%	5%	5%	0%	7%	79%	0%
San Dimas	2%	15%	4%	15%	4%	60%	0%	0%

Although Ch'ok materials were encountered in multiple sites in the Champotón River drainage, the complex remains poorly represented in comparison with later time periods. Ch'ok ceramics were encountered in small quantities within the CRSS study area. In total, 476 sherds recovered from sealed contexts were classified within four ceramic groups, with a notable pattern of intra-regional variability in paste and slip characteristics (for more detailed typological descriptions, see Ek 2015:410–534, 2022). This diversity could reflect a lack of standardization among regional communities or temporal variability that remains poorly understood due to small sample sizes. Given this uncertainty, we adopted a conservative approach in the creation of groups and types (Table 4). It would be unsurprising if continuing research results in typological subdivisions and refinement.

There are two dominant paste groups in the Ch'ok complex: a more frequent light gray ware, often with notable dark gray nuclei; and a less common compact, sandy, orange-textured ware. White, cream, orange, and red groups are present, consisting of very thin slips with a matte to powdery texture that is easily eroded. Redwares of the Yax ceramic group often have a thin slip that adheres poorly to vessel walls, with colors ranging from dark red to orange red (Figure 4). Orange-slipped ceramics of the Canasayab group are difficult to classify due to a very high degree of paste variability. Some ceramics classified in this group have compact pastes with complete oxidization, indicating more controlled firing. Other orange-slipped materials have coarse pastes with incomplete oxidization similar to local red- and white-slipped groups in the Ch'ok complex. This could indicate the existence of two separate production systems within this group.

White-slipped vessels of the Chanpet group are among the most distinctive components of the Ch'ok complex (Figure 5). Chanpet slips also have a matte surface texture, with a range of coloration between white and cream. Dichromes are a consistent and distinctive attribute of the complex. Red-on-white and red-on-cream pottery consists of a secondary red slip applied to the outside of the bowls, which extends a few centimeters below the edge of vessel interiors. Red dichromes differ from red monochromes, with the former having a much brighter and more lustrous surface finish. Less common black-on-white and black-on-cream dichromes include drip designs and wavy line motifs that to my knowledge have no analogs in contemporaneous complexes in other parts of the Maya area.

Pastes and surface treatment of unslipped wares are difficult to separate from the Achiotés Unslipped and Sapote Striated types of

the subsequent Ahal complex. The main difference between the Xkeulil Unslipped group in Ch'ok and later complexes is in vessel forms and the prevalence of striations. Xkeulil unslipped vessel forms include plates and bowls with direct to slightly incurved sides and thick, rounded lips. Jars are much less common than in the Ahal complex, in which unslipped bowls and dishes are relatively rare. The high frequencies of bowl and dish forms parallel unslipped burnished groups noted in contemporaneous complexes at other sites in the Maya area. Incised motifs are common on the exterior walls of bowls, ranging from rim bands to more complex geometric motifs. However, incised decorations are far less common or elaborate in comparison with other pre-Mamom traditions in the Maya Lowlands.

Beyond these primary groups, Ch'ok deposits consistently included examples of ceramics with rather unique characteristics that did not fit easily into established categories. A few examples of black-slipped sherds were encountered, with characteristics quite different from later waxy-ware black materials. Examples of ceramics with distinctive mottled brown and green slips were also found in pure Ch'ok deposits. These materials had more compact pastes, thinner vessel walls, and thick lustrous slips. The slip and paste characteristics of these materials were notably different from contemporary ceramics that occurred in greater frequencies, indicating alternative production systems. These minority types—potentially trade wares—were encountered in insufficient quantities to justify creation of new groups. However, given the relatively limited sample sizes, the pottery in use during this period presumably includes greater group diversity than is reflected in Table 4.

Ch'ok evinces notable intra-regional variability. The high variability in paste composition could reflect a lack of consistency in production methods within the region. The two main paste groups exist in the same contexts, perhaps reflecting overlapping production areas. Slip color is also highly variable, particularly in the white, cream and buff tones that could represent a range of coloration instead of distinct groups. Pending additional research in sites with substantial Ch'ok occupations, as well as direct comparisons with contemporary materials, the existing evidence indicates a high degree of intra-regional heterogeneity. Notable intersite differences in the region include a higher frequency of white-slipped and red-on-white dichromes in sites near the mouth of the Champotón River (Table 5). Inland sites—particularly Ulumal and San Dimas—have greater quantities of red- to orange-slipped materials. Further, redwares from coastal sites have a dull, matte texture compared with inland contexts. In contrast, redwares from

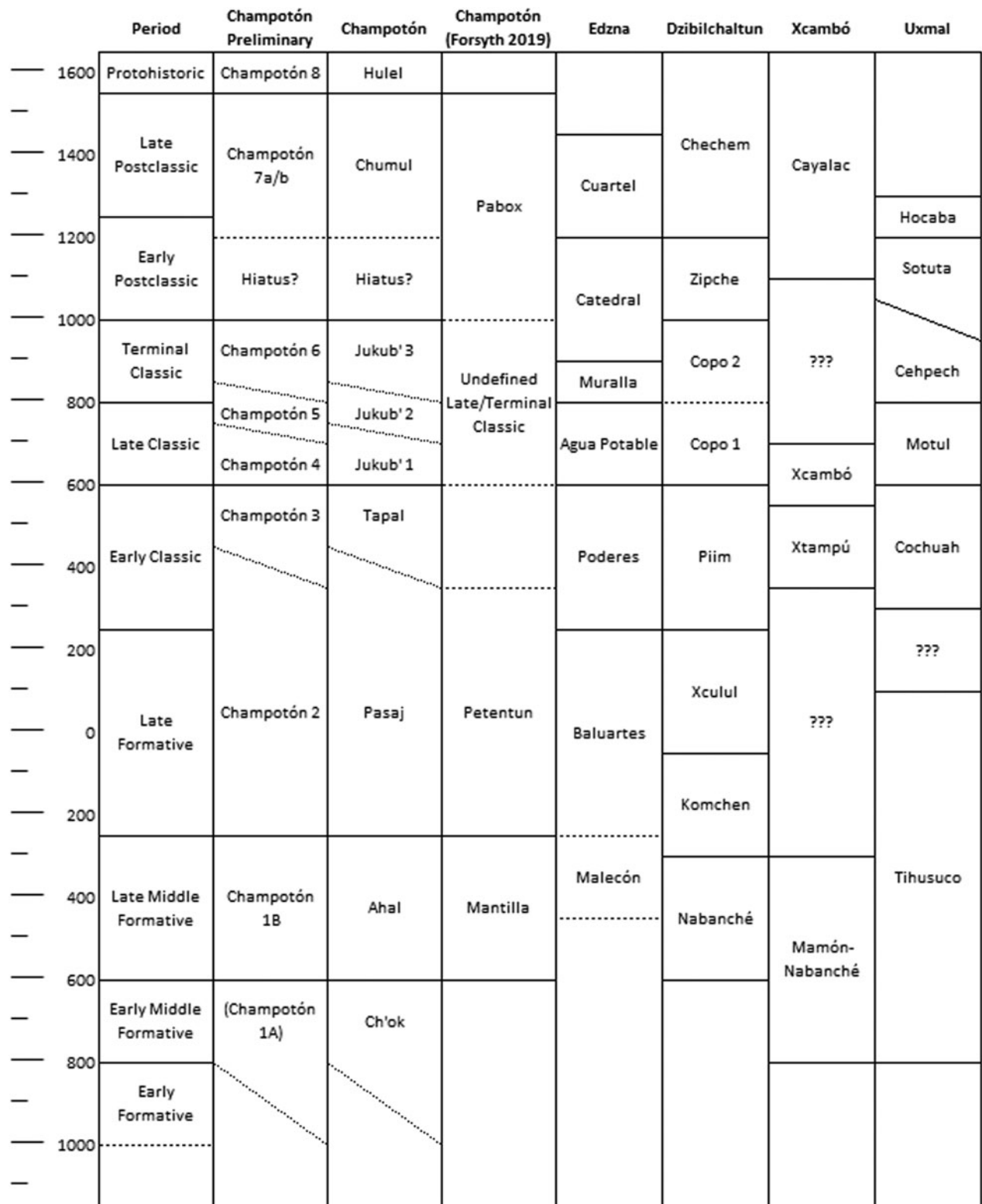


Figure 3. Ceramic complex and regional chronology developed for the Champotón River drainage, as well as contemporary related complexes. Image by the author.

Ulumal and San Dimas included serving vessels with glossier slips and more compact and completely fired pastes.

Although we currently lack sufficient evidence to determine if these differences reflect geographic or temporal variability,

coastal/inland differences mirror distinctions between temporal facets in the Real complex documented in recent research at Ceibal (Castellanos and Foias 2017; Inomata et al. 2015). Well-dated faceting of contemporary materials from the latter site

Table 4. Major constituent ceramic groups and types of the Ch’ok (Champotón IA) complex. The types share modal similarities with other pre-Mamom ceramic complexes identified in the Maya Lowlands. All of the type names listed above were established by the author.

Ceramic Group	Ceramic Type
Xkeulil Unslipped	Xkeulil Unslipped Pa’ilbox Incised Chanpeten Striated
Chanpet White	Chanpet White Sak Chak Red/White Sak Ek’ Black/White
Yax Orange-Red	Yax Orange-Red Dzacabuchen Incised
Canasayab Matte Orange	Canasayab Orange Moch Couoh Incised

documented increased prevalence of white-slipped and red-on-white dichromes in earlier deposits. This pattern could reflect an earlier chronological placement for Ch’ok contexts along the coast, adjacent to the mouth of the Champotón River and coastal estuaries, with later expansion into inland areas along

the Champotón River floodplain. This model will be evaluated in future research.

Interregional Comparisons

Ch’ok shares modal similarities with other early complexes, most notably with the Xe/Real sphere of the Upper Usumacinta, as well as contemporary pottery from northern Belize, the Belize Valley, and northern Yucatan. Paste composition and the prevalence of white-slipped and white base dichromes mirror descriptions of Xe sphere materials from Ceibal and Altar de Sacrificios (Adams 1971; Sabloff 1975). Yax Red shares form and slip similarities with Abelino Red from the Pasión/Usumacinta (Adams 1971; Sabloff 1975), particularly early (Real 1) forms of Abelino Red from Ceibal (Castellanos and Foias 2017; Inomata et al. 2013, 2015). This could indicate a relatively early chronological placement for these materials, particularly examples found at sites near the mouth of the Champotón River. The matte white slips, form repertoire, and sandy paste textures of the Chanpet group have shared characteristics with the Huetche ceramic group at Ceibal (Sabloff 1975:53–56). Finally, the small samples of black-slipped materials from Champotón have similar paste and slip characteristics as Crisanto Black (Adams 1971:24; Sabloff 1975:57). These correspondences indicate that the potters who produced Ch’ok ceramics

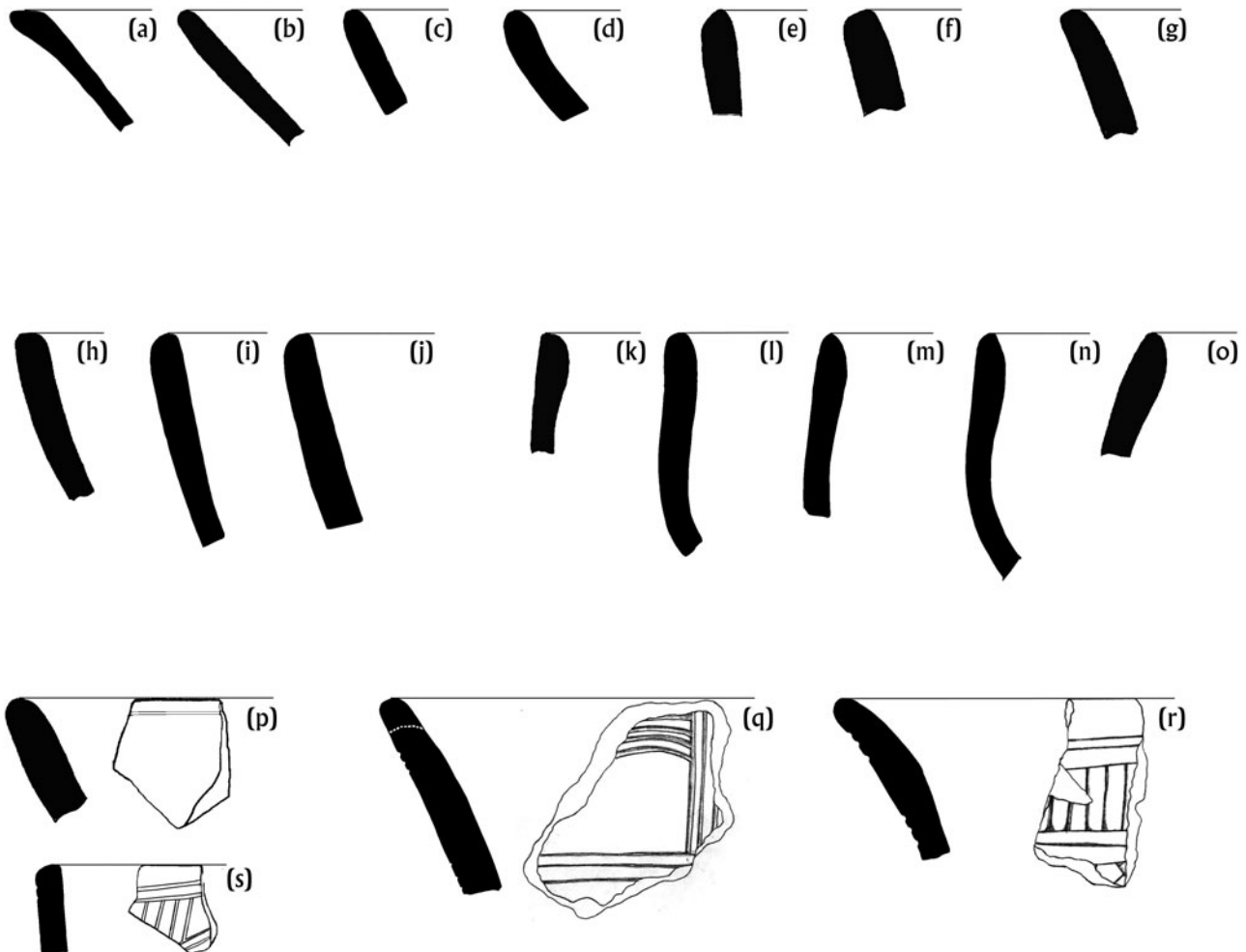


Figure 4. Ch’ok Ceramics I—all rims (a–s) exemplify the Yax ceramic group. Drawings by the author.

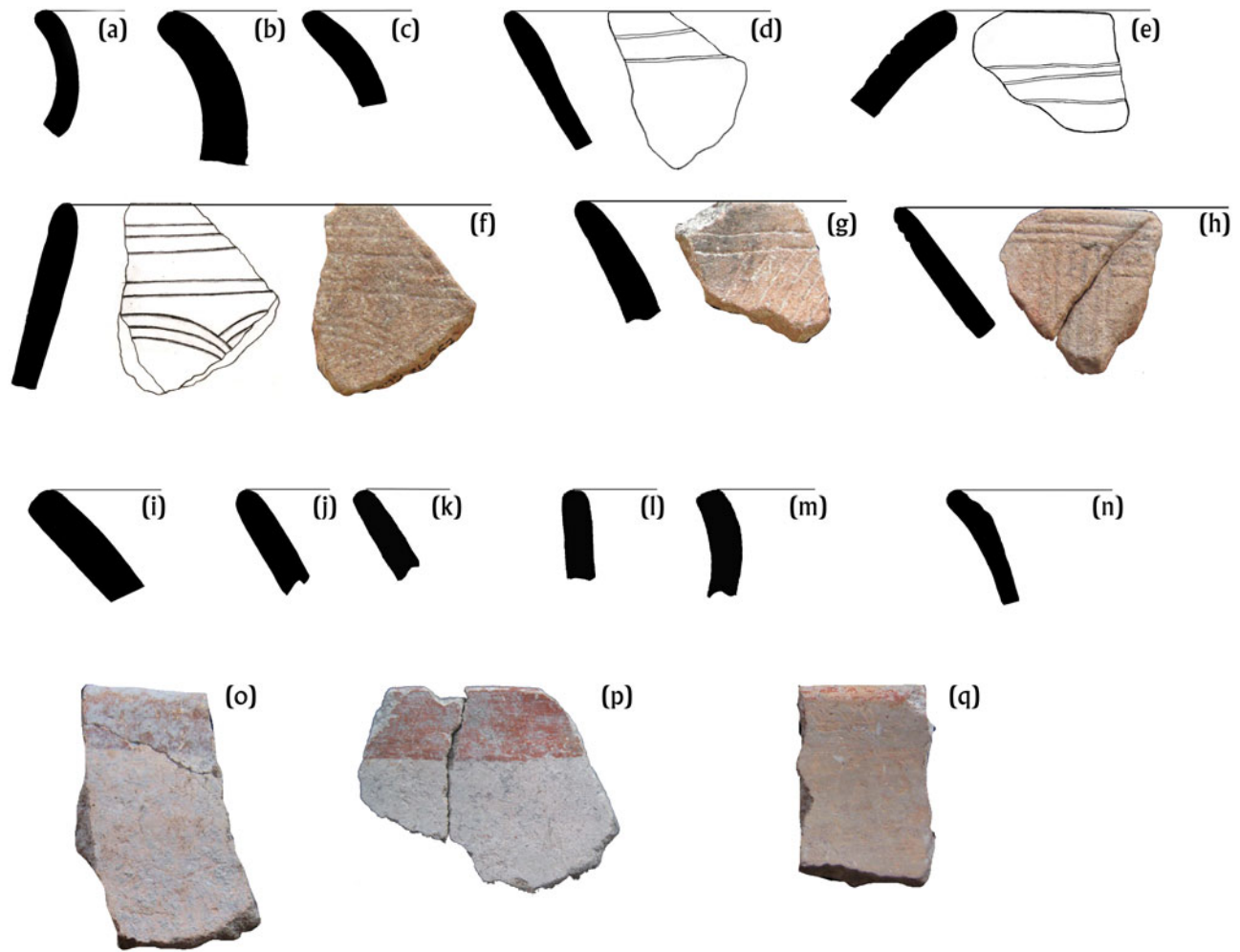


Figure 5. Ch'ok Ceramics 2—Chanpet, Canasayab, and Xkeulil ceramic groups. (a–e) Xkeulil Unslipped; (f–h) Canasayab Orange; (i–m, o–q) Chanpet White; (n) Misc. Mottled. Drawings and photographs by the author.

had closest interactions with communities in western parts of the Maya Lowlands, including the upper and middle Usumacinta drainages.

The Ch'ok complex shares similarities with other contemporary traditions across the Maya Lowlands. White-slipped ceramics are

also common at Holmul (Callaghan and Neivens de Estrada 2016: 44), Cahal Pech (Awe 1992:231; Sullivan and Awe 2013), and Tikal (Culbert 1979). The Yax group has modal similarities in Uck Red from the Belize Valley (Awe 1992; Sullivan and Awe

Table 5. Frequencies of ceramic groups and types in the Ch'ok (Champlotón 1A) complex. All groups and types established by the author (Ek 2015).

Ceramic Group	Ceramic Type	Champlotón: RSC	Champlotón: Paraíso II	El Zapote	Niop	R. Potrero Grande	San Dimas	Ulumal	Total
Xkeulil	Xkeulil Unslipped	61	68				21	1	151
	Pa'ilbox Incised				16				16
	Chanpeten Striated		20				9		29
Yax	Yax Red		17	1	33		45	66	162
	Dzacabuchen Incised		1		1	1	12	4	19
Chanpet	Chanpet White	14	1	1			19		35
	Sak Chak Red/White	14	10		2		2		28
	Sak Ek' Black/White	1			4				5
Canasayab	Canasayab Matte Orange				1		9		10
	Moch Couoh Incised				4		1		5
UNID	UNID Blackware		7		1		7		15
	Total	90	124	2	62	1	125	71	475

2013; Sullivan et al. 2009), Consejo Red from Northern Belize (Kosakowski 1987; Kosakowski and Pring 1998; Pring 1977), and K'atun Red from Holmul (Callaghan and Neivens de Estrada 2016: 36–41). The compact variant of Cansayab Orange shares attributes with Chicago Orange (Kosakowski 1987:21–22). Further, the mottled brown materials that occur in very small quantities described above could be local analogs to Mo Mottled from the Belize Valley and eastern Peten (Callaghan and Neivens de Estrada 2016:50; Neivens de Estrada 2014:191; Sullivan et al. 2009). However, these intersite comparisons remain conjectural pending formal in-person comparisons.

Form repertoires of unslipped ceramics noted in Ch'ok are also evident in pre-Mamom ceramic traditions in the Maya Lowlands. The prevalence of bowl and dish forms in the Xkeulil group have analogs in unslipped burnished groups in other early Middle Preclassic complexes, perhaps representing a local variant of this broader tradition. The frequency of unslipped and unslipped incised bowls and dishes is one of the clearest differentiators of early and late Middle Preclassic unslipped ceramics in the Champotón River drainage.

The red-on-white and red-on-cream dichromes that are particularly common in Ch'ok complex have also been noted in Cunil, Xe, and Eb sphere complexes (Awe 1992; Kosakowski 1987; Kosakowski and Pring 1998). Fine-line incisions are a common decorative mode in pre-Mamom complexes, including cross-hatched and zoned patterns (Andrews V 1990; Ball and Taschek 2003; Castellanos and Foias 2017; Cheetham 2005; Clark and Cheetham 2002). Geometric post-fire incisions are particularly notable among Ek complex materials initially documented at Komchen (Andrews V 1990). Similar materials have been documented at multiple sites in northeastern Yucatan and the Puuc Hills, likely representing a regional sphere (Andrews V and Bey III 2022; Andrews V et al. 2018). Yet elaborate geometric incised designs seem less prominent in Ch'ok than other contemporary traditions in the Maya area, particularly from northern Yucatan. Diagnostic modes, including dishes with highly everted rims and incised post-fire motifs on the interior lip common in the Cunil and Eb traditions of the interior Lowlands, have not been documented in Ch'ok. Although present, elaborate incised designs reported in other pre-Mamom complexes are less prevalent in the Champotón River drainage.

Ch'ok complex dichromes share notable similarities with early Middle Formative pottery from outside the Maya Lowlands, including the Soconusco, the northern Guatemalan highlands, Chiapa de Corzo, and the Valley of Oaxaca (Coe and Flannery 1967; Dixon 1959; Kosakowski and Pring 1998:59; Sharer and Sedat 1987). This red/white dichrome tradition appears across Mesoamerica at the transition between the Early and Middle Formative, with red-on-white dichromes giving way to zoned red-and-white decorations sometime around 800–700 B.C. (Coe and Flannery 1967:37–40). Sak Chac Red-on-white from the Ch'ok complex conforms to the earlier tradition, with zoned dichromes of the Muxanal group occurring in small but notable quantities in the ensuing Ahal complex.

Synthesis of extant data indicates a high degree of variability among the initial ceramic complexes in the Maya Lowlands. This regionalization could reflect a balkanized political landscape consisting of poorly connected villages, or even a high degree of ethnic diversity among the first sedentary groups in the Maya Lowlands (Figure 1). Ch'ok represents one of several contemporaneous small-scale regional spheres that existed between 1100 and 700 B.C.

Chronological Placement

Our understanding of the chronological placement of the Ch'ok complex has been limited by a lack of absolute dates from sealed stratigraphic contexts. However, all contexts with Ch'ok ceramics were identified in the lowest levels of excavations, often in pure contexts beneath levels pertaining to the later Ahal complex. Current evidence is consistent with Ch'ok as a unitary functional complex, as opposed to an early subassemblage that co-existed with Mamom sphere ceramics. These data indicate the temporal priority of Ch'ok in the Champotón ceramic sequence. Likewise, there is little evidence that Ch'ok has a direct developmental relationship with later ceramics of the Ahal complex.

As outlined above, the Ch'ok complex shares modal similarities with securely dated complexes from other parts of the Maya Lowlands. Although there remains some controversy of the precise dating of the initial appearance of pottery in the Maya area (Walker 2022), an increasing body of data supports a chronological placement of 1100–600 B.C. (Adams 1971; Andrews V 1990; Awe 1992; Callaghan and Neivens de Estrada 2016; Castellanos and Foias 2017; Inomata et al. 2013, 2015; Kosakowski and Pring 1998; Lohse 2010; Sabloff 1975). Within this span of five centuries there is some evidence that coastal assemblages initially appear in the earlier part of this range, with inland sites toward the latter facet (see below). However, this hypothesis remains tentative, pending further empirical evaluation.

Spatial Distribution of Ch'ok

Contexts with significant quantities of Ch'ok ceramics were documented at four sites in the Champotón River drainage: the modern city of Champotón, Niop, San Dimas, and Ulumal (Figure 2, Table 5). Ch'ok pottery was encountered in deeply buried strata in all cases, including sealed stratigraphic contexts beneath Ahal complex deposits at the coastal sites of Champotón and Niop. There is a strong correlation between the spatial distributions of Ch'ok and Ahal, part of a consistent locational pattern documented in pre-Mamom complexes across the Maya Lowlands. These data could indicate either continuity in populations that produced and consumed pre-Mamom and Mamom ceramics, or sampling bias toward sites with occupational continuity into later eras. Yet the stratigraphic and attribute data indicate that the transition between pre-Mamom and Mamom pottery reflects a major transition. As outlined above, Ch'ok and Ahal are documented in pure contexts, with a lack of clear evidence for developmental relationships. This supports both the temporal priority of the former and their existence as separate entities. The most parsimonious explanation for these patterns is shifting spheres of ceramic influences and relatively rapid adoption of new ceramic traditions. Whether this took place within a single population or was embedded in demographic processes (as outlined in the “Zoque hypothesis”; Andrews V 1990; Ball and Taschek 2003) remains unclear.

The provisional identifications of early (coastal) and later (inland) facets of the Ch'ok complex could reflect the economic foundations of the initial development of sedentism and ceramic use in the Champotón River drainage. Ch'ok materials with close modal similarities with early Real ceramics were encountered near the mouth of the Champotón River and adjacent coastal margin. These unmixed and possibly earliest Ch'ok deposits were documented near marine and estuary zones, including the estuaries of the lower Champotón River and adjacent mangroves along the

Gulf Coast (Ek 2015). This spatial pattern could indicate the importance of marine food resources associated with the transition to sedentism. Ch'ok ceramics were associated with *Melongena bispinosa* (crown conch) and *Crassostrea rhizophorae* (mangrove oyster). Both species share a similar habitat in intertidal and estuary zones. Although oysters no longer exist in the Champotón River due to pollution and overfishing, they were important resources in ancestral Maya subsistence economies during later pre-Contact eras (Collier 1964; Ruz Lhullier 1969:15–30).

Ceramics sharing stronger affinities with later facets of Real were encountered at the inland centers of San Dimas and Ulumal, located along the edges of the Champotón River floodplain. This setting would facilitate access to a greater mix of agricultural settings along the river floodplain margin, as well as resources along the river. Soils along the floodplain include humic vertisols: moderately fertile and easily cultivated soils with high water retention capacity. The middle to upper reaches of the Champotón River support productive fisheries and a wide range of wildlife. This setting would have been well-suited to a subsistence economy with increasing focus on domesticates. These spatial patterns could indicate the importance of marine and estuary food resources during the transition towards sedentism. A similar pattern has been observed in other parts of Mesoamerica, with the development of increasing sedentism supported by exploitation of highly productive floodplain, riverine, and estuary resources in the Early Preclassic period (Arnold 2009; Joyce and Henderson 2001). The Champotón data could reflect a similar process: initial adoption of pottery and village life based on a mixed subsistence system incorporating diverse marine food resources, with a gradually increasing reliance on a narrower range of cultivated plants through time. These historical developments mirror processes associated with the Preformative stage within the original Willey and Phillips chronology (Table 1).

Despite documentation of Ch'ok contexts within multiple sites in the region, it is important to reiterate the current limits in our understanding of this critical era. One current inadequacy is a lack of clear architectural correlations, with Ch'ok materials encountered in off-mound testing adjacent to constructions pertaining to later periods. Since the CRSS excavations did not penetrate architecture, we know little about the construction histories of associated structures. An additional problem is a near complete lack of chipped cryptocrystalline silicate (CCS) tools dating to this era. This could simply be sampling bias or might reflect more fundamental differences in regional tool production industries. Likewise, no greenstone or obsidian artifacts were encountered from Ch'ok contexts. As with CCS, this could be due to sampling bias. However, it is more likely that obsidian was less readily available and consumed in fundamentally different ways than in subsequent eras. The CRSS excavations recovered substantial assemblages of obsidian implements, with a gradually increasing frequency through the Preclassic and Classic, reaching a peak in the Late Postclassic. During the late Middle and Late Preclassic, obsidian was procured from the Chayal source in highland Guatemala (Ek 2015: 586–639). Information currently available indicates that interaction spheres of the early Middle Preclassic were focused on pan-Mesoamerican links to the west and were largely limited to information: material culture styles and iconography. It would not be until the subsequent Ahal complex that interaction spheres would shift to the interior Maya Lowlands and broaden to include obsidian commerce.

The transition between Ch'ok and the later Ahal complex witnessed dramatic changes, representing a tipping point in Maya

history. While deposits with Ch'ok ceramics were consistently identified beneath later Ahal contexts, the two complexes differ markedly in pastes, form repertoire, and decorative techniques. Further, these two complexes evince distinctive patterns of interactions with other regions: while Ch'ok reflects a regional tradition with links to other parts of Mesoamerica, Ahal is a participant in a much more homogeneous pan-Maya material culture phenomenon.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE FIRST DISTINCTIVELY “MAYA” MATERIAL CULTURE TRADITION

The transition between Ch'ok and Ahal represents a major inflection point in Champotón regional history. The Ahal complex was a participant in the earliest autochthonous Maya ceramic tradition: the Mamom ceramic sphere. In contrast to the regionalized expressions of a broader pan-Mesoamerican horizon in the early Middle Preclassic (Figure 1), the latter part of the Middle Preclassic witnessed the development of a more homogeneous material culture tradition. The Mamom sphere is very well-documented across the Maya area, characterized by distinctive waxy slips, consistent form repertoires, a high degree of technological sophistication, and a strengthening of interregional ceramic affinities within the Maya Lowlands.

The Ahal complex includes common Mamom-sphere ceramic groups, including Joventud, Pital, Chunhinta, Muxanal, and Achiotes (Table 6; Andrews V 1988, 1990; Forsyth 1983, 1989, 2019; Kosakowski 1987; Kosakowski and Pring 1998; Sabloff 1975; Smith 1955; Smith and Gifford 1966). Muxanal Red-on-cream is particularly common in the Champotón assemblage, characterized by well-executed zonal patterns and composite decorations. Compared with the previous period, Ahal pottery displays more complete firing and greater intraregional consistency.

Table 6. Major constituent ceramic groups and types of the Ahal (Champotón IB) complex. The groups and types are diagnostic of the Mamom ceramic sphere, signifying participation of Champotón communities in the first large-scale ceramic tradition in the Maya Lowlands.

Ceramic Group	Ceramic Type
Sapote	Sapote Striated
	Achiotes Unslipped
Pital	Achiotes CG: Incised
	Pital Cream
	Paso Danto Incised
	Xoxche Chamfered
	Pital CG: Fluted
Juventud	Las Ruinas Red/Orange
	Juventud Red
	Guitarra Incised
	Desvario Chamfered
	Juventud CG: Fluted
Chunhinta	Juventud CG: Impressed
	Chunhinta Black
	Deprecio Incised
	Centenario Fluted
Muxanal	Chunhinta CG: Chamfered
	Muxanal Red-on-Cream
	Muxanal CG: Composite Fluted
	Muxanal CG: Composite Incised
	Loche Bichrome Incised

These attributes reflect a higher degree of technological sophistication in ceramic production industries. The transition between the early and late facets of the Middle Preclassic reflects a major change in ceramic affinities, with little evidence for a developmental relationship between the Ch'ok and Ahal pottery traditions.

Mamom sphere ceramics are well represented in sites throughout the region. Most sites along the central Campeche coast tested by the CRSS were occupied during this era, indicating population growth (Anaya Cancino et al. 2009; Ball 1977, 1978; Ball and Taschek 2015; Benavides Castillo 2003, 2005; Ek 2012a, 2015; Folan et al. 2013; Ford 1986; Forsyth 1983, 2008, 2019; Nelson 1973; Suárez Aguillar and Ojeda Mas 1996; Suárez Aguillar et al. 2010; Vargas Pacheco 2001a, 2001b; Williams-Beck 1994). Despite a notable degree of homogeneity, studies of paste composition indicate local production of most Mamom sphere ceramics (Stanton and Ardren 2005:214). Correspondences among complexes incorporated in the Mamom sphere reflect a notable increase in interaction among potters across the Maya area compared with the preceding era (Forsyth 2008:213–214). The first evidence for obsidian exchange also dates to this period, with materials from the Guatemalan highlands (particularly the Chayal source) appearing in low densities (Ek 2015:605–616). Although the catalysts of this homogeneity remain unclear, existing evidence reflects a reduction in barriers to the movement of information during this period.

In summary, a major transformation took place within Champotón sometime between the eighth and seventh centuries B.C. While the earliest pottery reflects participation in a regionalized ceramic system, the shift from the Ch'ok to Ahal complexes marks the inclusion of Champotón into a pan-Maya ceramic tradition that would persist for several centuries. Based on currently available evidence, the most parsimonious explanation for this transition is adoption of a new and distinctly Maya ceramic tradition that initially developed in northern Belize and expanded to encompass much of the Maya area (Andrews V 1990; Kosakowski and Pring 1998: 64; Lohse 2010; Walker 2022). While the preceding era is characterized by peripheral membership within an expansive Mesoamerican horizon among several small-scale ceramic spheres, the development of the Mamom sphere marks the beginning of a much more inclusive and distinctively Maya material culture tradition. Questions remain concerning the broader political, economic, and social processes in which these phenomena were embedded. However, it is clear that sedentary village life had become the dominant norm across the Maya area, with information and likely goods flowing readily between communities.

EIGHT CENTURIES OF CONSERVATISM AND CONTINUITY

In contrast to the abrupt shift between the Ch'ok and Ahal complexes, the transition between Ahal and the subsequent Pasaj complexes was gradual. Participation in this widespread and homogeneous waxy-ware tradition extends through the end of the Late Preclassic period. The Pasaj complex was a full participant in the most extensively and consistently documented ceramic tradition in the Maya area: the Chicanel sphere. The Chicanel sphere had an even broader geographic distribution, with remarkable consistency across most of the Maya Lowlands.

The Chicanel complex shares many attributes with the earlier Mamom sphere, with clear evidence for a direct developmental relationship. In fact, at Champotón the dividing line between Ahal and Pasaj is largely arbitrary, with intermediate forms clearly evident.

Despite the long period of use, conservatism in the production and consumption of waxy-ware ceramics complicates the delimitation of temporal facets. Together, the Ahal and Pasaj complexes represent an ongoing ceramic tradition that demonstrates remarkable continuity over the course of eight centuries.

The predominant groups in the Pasaj complex include Sierra, Polvero, Flor, and Mateo, with a relatively high diversity of minority groups, including Mateo, Xuch, and Zapatista (Table 7). A regional variant of this tradition defined by frequencies of a few forms and modes has been documented across much of central Campeche (Forsyth 1983:33–37, 2019:212–213). Yet distinctions between other regions are subtle, including higher frequencies of composite surface treatments (particularly slipped vessels with unslipped and striated exteriors). Despite this regional variation, the Pasaj complex is a full participant in the Chicanel sphere.

During the Ahal and Pasaj eras, we have a more complete view of settlement patterns and regional economic systems. Demographic expansion is reflected in all parts of the region, with expansion of communities along the coast, as well as establishment of major centers inland along the Champotón River waterway. Increasing sociopolitical complexity is evident in monumental architecture

Table 7. Major constituent ceramic groups and types of the Pasaj (Champotón 2) complex. The groups and types are diagnostic of the Chicanel ceramic sphere, with notable similarities with Chicanel sphere materials from across the Maya Lowlands.

Ceramic Group	Ceramic Type
Sierra	Sierra Red
	Laguna Verde Incised
	Alta Mira Fluted
	Lagartos Punctated
	Puletan Red-on-Unslipped
	Ciego Composite
	Hongo Composite
	Repasto Black-on-Red
	Xuch Black and Red
	Sierra CG: Unnamed Composite
	Sapote
Flor	Achiotes Unslipped
	Achiotes CG: Incised
	Flor Cream
Polvero	Accordion Incised
	Flor CG: Unslipped Exterior
	Mateo Red-on-Cream
	Xcampeu Composite
	Flor CG: Special Resist
	Flor CG: Unnamed Composite
	Polvero Black
Lechugal Incised	
Caramba	Polvero CG: Unslipped Exterior
	Polvero CG: Fluted
Escobal	Koben Composite
	Polvero CG: Unnamed Composite
San Dimas	Caramba Red-on-Orange
	Caramba CG: Fluted
Zapatista	Escobal Red-on-Buffer
	San Dimas Grey
Nolo	Zapatista Trickle Dichrome
	Tipikal Preslip Striated
Unto	Unto Preslip Striated

and regional demographic expansion. Communities expanded across the coastal margin, with research along the littoral revealing a continuous distribution of residential groups. Central places with public monumental architecture have been documented within this continuous settlement matrix at Champotón and Moquel, with smaller centers in Niop and Rancho Potrero Grande (Figure 2). The largest inland centers in the region—Ulumal and San Dimas—also had extensive Ahal occupations. These places emerged as central nodes of public life no later than this period.

Excavations within the modern city of Champotón by the Universidad Autónoma de Campeche indicate population growth and conspicuous investments in monumental architecture, with Champotón rising to regional prominence during this period (Folan et al. 2002, 2003, 2004). The primary complex in Group 1 consists of a massive platform, measuring over 54 × 54 m in area and 8 m in height, which supported three superstructures (Figure 6; Folan et al. 2001, 2003, 2007; Forsyth 2008:216, 2019; Forsyth and Folan 2019). This structure was occupied by the late Middle Preclassic and reached its maximum size by the Late Preclassic period. This triadic architectural template has been documented in contemporary centers across the Maya Lowlands (Anderson 2011; Awe et al. 2017; Folan et al. 2001; Mathews 1995, 1998; Mathews and Maldonado Cárdenas 2006; Vargas Pacheco 2001a). The principal platform shares characteristics with the megalithic style documented in the Late Preclassic period in the Northern Lowlands, including rounded corners and use of megalithic stones over a meter in length (Mathews and Maldonado Cárdenas 2006:98–100). The Group 1 platform differs from the latter tradition in the use of finely cut and extremely large stones tightly fitted together without use of crushed stone chinking. Structure 1 in Group 1 includes multiple stones weighing in excess of 250 kg, with the monolithic stair on the north side of the structure built using elements more than 7 m in length (Forsyth and Folan 2019; Folan et al. 2002, 2004).

Group 1 is the largest existing structure within the city of Champotón. Although most of the epicenter of ancient Champotón has been heavily impacted by continuous occupation, extensive distributions of megalithic stones throughout the modern city provide a hint of the extent and scale of the ancient center. It is very likely that Champotón emerged as one of the largest centers along the Campeche coast by the Late Preclassic period (Ek 2012a, 2015, 2022; Folan et al. 2002, 2003, 2004, 2007, 2013; Forsyth 2008, 2012, 2019).

We also have a better understanding of regional economic systems and human-environmental interactions during the latter part of the Preclassic period. Existing evidence reflects the development of a diversified regional subsistence system. Faunal assemblages from coastal settlements in Champotón indicate the exploitation of a wide range of marine resources (Ek 2012b, 2015). The development of agricultural communities in the upper reaches of the Champotón River is concentrated initially along the floodplain, facilitating access to flat terrain dominated by humic vertisols. Due to high capacity for water retention, humic vertisols can help to mitigate risks associated with seasonal and erratic rains. The main management challenge with cultivation in humic vertisols is management of excess water. During the Formative period there is little evidence for investments in agricultural infrastructure to facilitate exploitation of upland soils. The most common implements in the lithic tool assemblage from the two inland centers of Ulumal and San Dimas are associated with agricultural activities. These implements were part of a local or perhaps regional exchange system,

with evidence for production at the site of San Dimas. Obsidian from Highland Guatemalan sources appear in household assemblages, although in lower frequencies than later eras (Ek 2015: 605–615). These data indicate some access to exotic materials, but no evidence of widespread consumption as a basic part of regional economies.

The preponderance of evidence suggests a period of population growth supported by previously unexploited or underexploited resources from the late Middle Preclassic through the end of the Late Preclassic period. This era of growth included a major expansion of the population across the region, but with little evidence of intensification of food production. In other publications I refer to this set of human-environmental dynamics of the Preclassic period as the Localized Extensive Diversified socio-ecological regime (Ek 2015:640–733, 2018). The characteristics of the regime include extensive settlements, local subsistence economies, and the exploitation of diverse food resources in different eco-zones. During this period, it is likely that growing populations took advantage of relatively abundant food resources, including marine and estuarine fisheries and moderately fertile but easily cultivable soils along the floodplain of the Champotón River. The subsistence economy—as well as the production and exchange of most commodities—were local in scale. Multiple lines of evidence indicate that the Ahal and Pasaj complexes developed within this broader context characterized by conservatism and growth over the course of at least eight centuries.

In aggregate, the era from the start of the late Middle Preclassic and extending through the close of the Late Preclassic was marked by the adoption of a unified material culture tradition that linked communities across the Maya Lowlands. The waxy-ware tradition was part of a broader suite of material culture traits that could be characterized as broadly “Maya” in nature and distribution. This broader ceramic tradition was marked by widespread distribution, homogeneity, and remarkable continuity over approximately eight centuries. Although questions remain about the political, economic, or social mechanisms which might explain this conservatism, most of the key developments that unfolded in association with the Mamom sphere intensify during the ensuing Late Preclassic, including full adoption of agricultural lifeways, population growth, urbanization, and the development of a distinctive Maya material and visual culture tradition.

RECONSIDERING EARLY MAYA CHRONOLOGICAL FRAMEWORKS

Chronological frameworks influence the way we think about the past, with the potential to either promote or hinder the development of new theories of social change. The gradual metamorphosis of the Willey/Phillips framework from a developmental to absolute chronology has created a disjunction between our system of periodization and the empirical record. Due to a failure to engage in episodic revision over the course of generations of research, the gap between this chronological framework and empirical evidence continues to widen. The ongoing use of this system without amendments or critical evaluation is justifiable only by superficial utility as an expedient reference to fixed chronological periods.

As change in human societies is often characterized by punctuated equilibria, the ways we classify periods of time should conform to our best understanding of episodic political, social, economic, and ecological reorganizations. We thus return to the original formulation of the Willey/Phillips framework, outlined in Table 1,

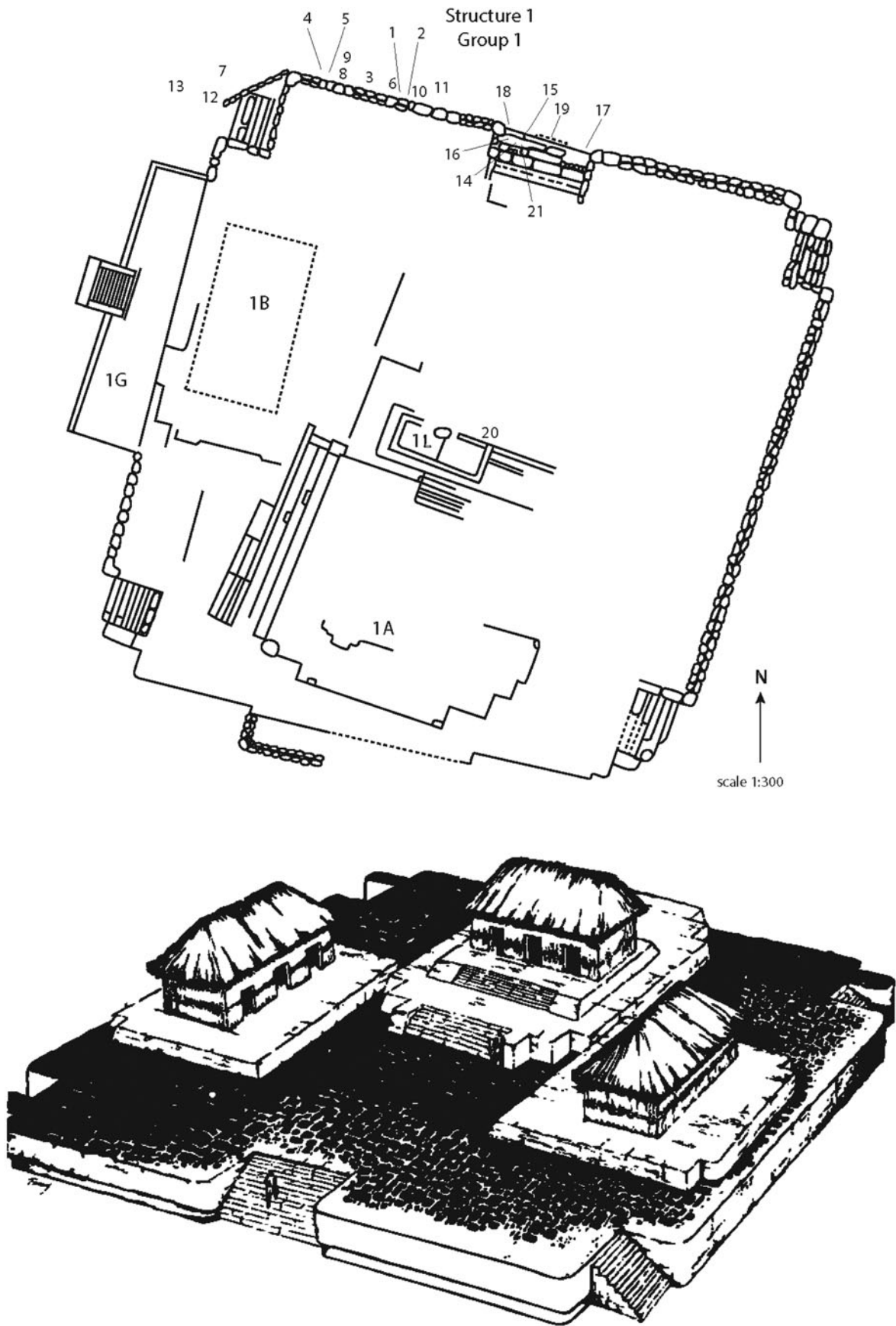


Figure 6. Plan and reconstruction of Group 1, Champotón. Adapted from Folan et al. 2007; Forsyth and Folan 2019.

to reconsider how extant information might best fit into this set of heuristics untethered to largely outdated understanding of their temporal placement. In this endeavor, analytical separation of developmental phases and periods is useful. As different types of social phenomena can have variable temporalities, chronological frameworks with nested temporal scales can provide a useful conceptual foundation (Bintliff 1991; Braudel 1958; Iannone 2002; Knapp 1992; Smith 1992).

The Nascent Formative: Islands of Complexity (1100–600 B.C.)

Sedentary agricultural life is a foundational element in the definition of Mesoamerican culture. Proxies for the development of these distinguishing characteristics include habitual dietary reliance on domesticates, sedentism, and ceramic use. Yet the appearance of domesticated maize dates as far back as 3400 B.C. (Pohl et al. 1996), with corn as a viable staple product by 2200 B.C. (Kennett et al. 2017). The adoption of agricultural lifestyles is not evident until the beginning of the second millennium B.C. (Blake 2015; Clark et al. 2007; Inomata et al. 2015; Lohse 2010, 2022; Lohse et al. 2006; Rosenswig 2010, 2011, 2015; Rosenswig et al. 2015). By 1000 B.C. there is unambiguous evidence for ceramic production and consumption within multiple areas of the Maya Lowlands (Figure 1). The earliest documented constructions of communal ritual spaces date to the ensuing centuries. These new dynamics are all consistent with the culmination of the Preformative—a gradual transition to the full adoption of Formative lifeways—as outlined in the Willey/Phillips framework. Thus, the end of the first millennium B.C. represents a watershed moment in the Maya past.

Existing data indicate that the initial adoption of sedentism was not a wholesale transition, but a new lifestyle adopted by communities interspersed among mobile neighbors. Rosenswig (2011, 2016) refers to these early experiments with agricultural life as “islands” of complexity. One of the most notable features of this pivotal era is the consistent association with a shared set of symbolism and iconography that was pan-Mesoamerican in scale. However, there seems to be little evidence for adoption of common ceramic production technologies. Variability in the first ceramic complexes in the Maya Lowlands is likely the product of localized production of pottery conforming to shared practices (Bill 2013:34–39). This is reflected by the marked intra-regional variability of the Ch’ok complex within the Champotón River drainage, as well as differences between pre-Mamom ceramic complexes across the Maya area (Figure 1). Extant data reflect relatively small-scale communities of ceramic producers with distinctive practices, norms, and technologies. This pattern of regionalization differs markedly from latter eras following the appearance of the Mamom sphere. The dispersion of these communities, and the nature of links between them, are consistent with Rosenswig’s (2011, 2015, 2016) archipelago analogy. The adoption of a shared visual culture reflected in this early Mesoamerican horizon likely reflects the importance of shared practices and ideologies in the initial development of central places for communal ritual.

The Preformative/Formative transition is reflected in the gap between evidence for maize agriculture and evidence of ceramic use. Likewise, the balkanization of ceramic spheres during this era, with a high degree of variability between ceramic complexes across the Maya Lowlands, is consistent with dispersed adoption of village life. However, these spheres share important similarities

in decorative modes that reflect participation in a broader emergent system of interaction.

Developments that took place sometime between 1100 and 600 B.C. reflect a major point of disconnect between the original intent of the Willey/Phillips developmental sequence and its subsequent metamorphosis into an absolute chronology. Based on the currently accepted boundaries between major periods within the Maya variant of the Mesoamerican chronological framework, the dynamics outlined above would begin at the end of the Early Preclassic and extend into the first few centuries of the Middle Preclassic. Yet in the Maya area this represents the earliest evidence for the adoption of Formative lifeways, and thus the beginning of the Formative stage as envisioned by Willey and Phillips.

Besides lack of congruence between developmental phases and periods, our current nomenclature fails to correlate key long-term historical thresholds with high-level chronological eras. Characterizing the entire time span between 1000 and 250 B.C. as a single “Middle Preclassic” period glosses over critical changes that take place during this era. If the goal of periodization is to organize the chaos of the past into units useful for delimiting and understanding processes of political, economic, and social change, conflating most of the first millennium B.C. into a single period is not just counterproductive, but misleading. The era between 1100 and 600 B.C. represents a key moment in Maya history, differing in important ways from the ensuing era. Delimiting this by faceting—the early and late Middle Preclassic—places primacy on the chronological system in lieu of empirically evident contours of history. To avoid confusion that would result from the redefinition of terms already in widespread use, neologism is a viable alternative. I suggest we adopt the term *Nascent Formative* to classify the era corresponding to the initial adoption of sedentism, ceramics, and pan-Mesoamerican iconographic systems in the Maya area. Alternatively, terms like “Cunil Horizon” (Cheetham 2005) highlight some important defining attributes of material culture traditions during this time period: adoption of a shared set of symbolism, iconography, and decorative modes across dispersed local ceramic traditions. However, the value of analytical separation between horizons (defined by visual culture) and periods also lends support for new chronological terminology.

The spread of a pan-Mesoamerican visual culture horizon is also expressed in non-ceramic goods. A common architectural template—termed the Middle Formative Chiapas Pattern—has been noted at La Venta, the Grijalva River drainage, and the confluence of the San Pedro and Usumacinta waterways (Clark and Hansen 2001; Inomata 2019; Inomata and Henderson 2016; Vázquez López and Triadan 2019). This site plan consists of a central E-Group assemblage, comprised of square (often radial) western structures paired with an elongated structure located to the east (Chase and Chase 1995; Doyle 2012; Freidel et al. 2017). The first well-documented public monumental architecture in the Maya Lowlands dates to 1000 B.C. at Ceibal (Inomata et al. 2013). Important recent finds at Aguada Fénix likely date to the same timeframe. By 800 B.C., E-Group assemblages were built in the central Maya Lowlands at Tikal and Cival (Estrada-Belli 2006, 2010; Laporte 1995; Laporte and Fialko 1995) and in northern Yucatan at Komchen (Andrews V et al. 2018; Lohse 2010, 2022; Ringle 1999). These data are consistent with a set of interacting yet dispersed societies extending from the Maya Lowlands, Chiapas, the Pacific Coast, and the southern Gulf Coast. These communities were linked by shared symbolism and ritual practices centering on early ceremonial complexes (Inomata et al. 2013; Love 1999).

The relatively rapid adoption of sedentism, ceramics, and communal ritual around 1000 B.C. is thus best explained as the adoption of an emergent Mesoamerican iconographic system embedded in ideological, political, and social movements that remain poorly understood. A common set of iconography and decorative motifs were appear in a range of locally produced ceramics and trade items (Clark and Pye 2006; Cheetham 2005; Lohse 2010:344). The adoption of Formative lifestyles likely reflects new forms of community interaction and integration, including collective construction of public spaces, communal rituals within those places, consumption of greenstone and other exotic objects, and shared practices within those spaces, perhaps involving feasting.

The development of a small-scale regional sphere with notable intra-regional variability in Champotón embodies the fundamental character of developments during the Nascent Formative period. The Ch'ok complex is one expression of the widespread adoption of ceramics at approximately 1000 B.C. These initial ceramic traditions were incorporated into a pan-Mesoamerican horizon defined by shared symbolism and iconography. The broader social context in which this visual culture developed likely involved shared ritual practices and ideologies. Despite these similarities, the great degree of variability and regionalization that characterize pre-Mamom ceramic traditions in the Maya area reflect a political landscape consisting of loosely organized systems of small societies experimenting with new styles of social, political, and economic life. The term "Nascent Formative" serves to highlight the pan-Mesoamerican character of these new forms of material and visual culture, while avoiding the re-use of terminology associated with fixed periods of time in other regions.

The Preclassic: The First Pan-Maya Material Culture Tradition (600 B.C.–A.D. 250)

A major change in ceramic traditions and spheres of interaction took place sometime around the seventh century B.C., pertaining to the beginning of the late Middle Preclassic period in the current Maya chronology. A regionalized network of ceramic spheres linked within a broader pan-Mesoamerican horizon gave way to a more homogeneous tradition that encompassed much of the Maya Lowlands. This is reflected by the widespread adoption of the Mamom sphere by communities across the Maya area. Ceramic spheres are the result of social dynamics: sharing of information and aesthetic values among both producers and consumers and relatively unimpeded movements of goods and ideas (Ball 1993: 256–257). The broad distribution and homogeneity of the Mamom sphere contrasts sharply with the small-scale regionalized spheres of the preceding era, indicating much more open flows of information. The crystallization of this interaction sphere was embedded within the proliferation of sedentary village life and demographic growth across the Maya area.

In the Champotón River drainage, ceramics of the Ahal complex reflect full participation within this emergent sphere. The lack of evidence for clear developmental relationships between the Ch'ok and Ahal complexes in Champotón indicates that this process was embedded within significant social and political reorganizations. Across the Maya area, this period witnessed demographic expansion in both coastal and inland zones. In the CRSS project study area, this is reflected in the initiation of major construction at centers such as Champotón, Ulumal, Moquel, and San Dimas. Yet within this period characterized by growth and the crystallization of a uniquely

Maya cultural tradition, there exist notable continuities, including locational continuity between pre-Mamom and Mamom occupations and continued use of certain architectural templates, such as the E-Group complex.

The origins of the Mamom phenomenon remain unclear. There is some evidence that Mamom ceramics originated in northern Belize (Andrews V 1990; Ball and Taschek 2003; Kosakowski 1987; Kosakowski and Pring 1998) and proliferated across the Maya area. Interestingly, the place of origin of this new sphere in northern Belize was the part of the Maya Lowlands that has the weakest evidence for participation in the earlier pan-Mesoamerican iconographic system (Kosakowski and Pring 1998:64). Mamom sphere ceramics represent the initial phase of an extremely homogeneous, widespread, long-lived, and distinctively Maya waxy-ware ceramic tradition that develops gradually into the ensuing Chicanel sphere. The waxy-ware tradition would extend across most of the Maya Lowlands between 600 B.C. and A.D. 250.

The Mamom tradition marks the beginning of a long period of population expansion, full adoption of sedentary agricultural life-ways, and a gradual process of accumulating sociopolitical complexity. The catalyst of this process was likely a fundamental shift towards the adoption of complexity as a default problem-solving mechanism throughout an extended period of growth (Gunderson and Holling 2002; Tainter 2000, 2006). The waxy-slipped ceramics of the Mamom and ensuing Chicanel spheres demonstrate an amazing degree of homogeneity, reflecting a much greater degree of interaction among producers across the Maya Lowlands. Uniquely, Maya forms of material culture are also evident in architecture, with an increasing focus on monumentality reflected in stepped pyramid construction and triadic complexes combined with continuing construction of E-Group assemblages (Andrews V et al. 2018; Doyle 2012; Estrada-Belli 2006, 2010; Freidel et al. 2017; Hansen 1992, 2000, 2005; Inomata et al. 2013, 2015; Laporte 1995; Laporte and Fialko 1995; McAnany 2002; Taube et al. 2010; Traxler and Sharer 2016). The settings for these constructions take on an increasingly urban character by the latter part of the first millennium B.C., associated with the formation of the earliest cities. Although the lack of textual data during this era hinders our ability to understand broader geopolitical dynamics, centers like El Mirador, Tikal, Calakmul, Yaxnohcah, Tintal, Komchen, Xocnaceh, and others across the Maya area had likely developed into regional powers by this time (Brown and Bey 2018; Estrada-Belli 2010; Traxler and Sharer 2016). The size and monumentality of El Mirador could reflect the existence of larger-scale political hegemonies. However, our limited understanding of political history during this period hinders our capacity to identify temporal faceting that corresponds to dynamics with middle-range temporalities (Braudel's conjunctures or Butzer's adaptive adjustments).

Using the approach outlined by Childe (1950:2), the Middle Preclassic corresponds to the first unambiguous appearance of a Maya "archaeological culture." The period between 600 and 250 B.C. marks the earliest autochthonous development of a uniquely Maya material culture tradition. The crystallization of a distinctive material culture tradition was not limited to the Maya Lowlands, as the formation of traditions that correspond to culture areas also took place in Oaxaca, the Soconusco, and the Guatemalan Highlands (e.g., Coe and Flannery 1967:24). Mesoamerica would not witness the development of another pan-Mesoamerican iconographic and symbolic system until the Classic period. If the goal of periodization is to document inflection points that divide the

expanse of time into meaningful categories, this transition clearly warrants a high-level designation. Instead of retrofitting these historical inflection points into the existing chronology by conflating two fundamentally different eras as facets of a more inclusive Middle Preclassic period, it is preferable to modify our chronologies to create a better fit for the contours of the past.

The transition between the Ahal and Pasaj complexes at Champotón mirrors the transition seen in sites across the Maya Lowlands that participated in the Mamom and Chicanel sphere: gradual transition. As in many parts of the Maya area, the period between 600 B.C. and A.D. 250 is characterized by a widespread pattern of population growth marked by remarkable continuity in settlement locations, human ecology, and material culture. Indeed, dynamics during this period would fit within a single broad tradition from the perspective of temporal units in the *longue durée*. Within the Maya Lowlands, this broader Preclassic tradition is characterized by an 850-year period of remarkable conservatism. In this case, limiting the Middle Preclassic to the era comprised of the Mamom sphere, and the Late Preclassic to the temporal extent of the Chicanel sphere, creates a far better match between temporal heuristics and our current understanding of past social dynamics.

As with the adoption of the Mamom sphere, the transition from the end of the Preclassic to the Early Classic period is indicative of major change. Many cities fell into abandonment, while others adopted radically new forms of political, economic, and social organization (Freidel and Schele 1988; Grube 1995; Laporte 1995). In contrast to the extremely homogeneous ceramic traditions of the Mamom/Chicanel spheres, Classic period complexes demonstrate a more regionalized pattern. Although outside the scope of this article, this transition very clearly marks another major inflection point in Maya history.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of any chronological framework is to provide a means to divide the vast expanse of time into useful units; to create order out of chaos. Yet chronological units are task-specific heuristics, with a multitude of possible forms holding variable analytical utility for distinct research questions (Ramenofsky 1998:75). The system we implement to make sense of the ancestral Maya past was developed in the 1950s by Willey and Phillips as a developmental scheme applicable to the entire western hemisphere. As such, this framework was explicitly uncoupled from absolute temporal intervals: an ordinal classification system based on qualitative criteria. The cultural transitions that defined eras were untethered from any specific regional context, and were flexible to accommodate ongoing empirical refinements. At some point after the near universal adoption of this system in Mesoamerican research during the mid-twentieth century, the Willey/Phillips developmental scheme metamorphosed into a periodization with temporal boundaries fixed in absolute interval time. The increasing pace of empirical advancements in Maya archaeology and epigraphy brings us to a juncture in which a holistic reconsideration of chronological heuristics is vital and long overdue. In retrospect, this growing gap between periodization and empirical evidence is the result of over-emphasis on a chronological framework that has been implemented in ways for which it was not intended. The trajectory of decreasing heuristic value is thus unsurprising. As our understanding of the contours of history change with ongoing archaeological research, our unfortunate reaction has been to shoehorn these new data into chronological units that have largely lost their intended function.

The earliest eras of human occupation in the Champotón River drainage highlight the incongruence between the standard disciplinary chronological framework and the major inflection points in the past. The Ch'ok ceramic complex was part of a localized ceramic tradition, one of several regionalized ceramic spheres—including the Cunil, Eb, Swasey, Ek, and Xe spheres—linked by participation in a broader pan-Mesoamerican stylistic, iconographic, and ideological system. The initial adoption of Formative lifeways in the Maya area was associated with participation in a broad pan-Mesoamerican interaction sphere. These communities likely consisted of dispersed local traditions linked by shared symbolism, iconography, and ritual practices broadly consistent with Rosenswig's (2011, 2015, 2016) analogy of an "archipelago of complexity." In the current chronology, this period is afforded a low order of historical significance: the early facet of the Middle Preclassic period. Instead, I propose revision of our chronological terminology that highlights the pivotal nature of this era in relation to both the preceding and ensuing eras: the Nascent Formative.

Sometime around the seventh century B.C. there was a major transition from sparse experimentation with sedentary life to widespread adoption and expansion of communities participating in an insular and far more homogeneous material culture tradition that extended across much of the Maya Lowlands. The adoption of this uniquely Maya tradition was accompanied by population growth and the construction of public central places of communal ritual across the Maya area. In the revised chronology proposed in this article, the Middle Preclassic would be restricted to the chronological span of the Mamom sphere (600–250 B.C.). These dynamics reflect the widespread adoption of Formative lifestyles: sedentism, full reliance on agricultural staples, open exchange of information, and adoption of increasing complexity as a problem-solving mechanism. The pivotal nature of this historical inflection point is well-represented in the Champotón River drainage. Archaeological evidence from across the region indicates that the ensuing centuries were characterized by gradual growth and a remarkable degree of conservatism in material culture traditions. The ensuing transition between the Ahal and Pasaj complexes was gradual. The latter complex was a full participant in the Chicanel sphere, a later manifestation of the same waxy-ware tradition with an even broader distribution across the Maya area.

These and other archaeological and epigraphic advancements in recent decades cannot be effectively accommodated within the dominant chronological framework used in the Maya Lowlands. As a developmental scheme that gradually ossified into a fixed absolute chronology, this system not only carries outdated developmental baggage, but also lacks flexibility to integrate new information. Instead of continuing to bend new data to fit into this existing system, I have proposed revisions to this chronology based on a few specific premises. First, the system should be based on analytical separation of developmental phases (social, political, and economic processes) and periods (chunks of time with fixed temporal boundaries). Second, as different types of phenomena have variable temporalities, chronological frameworks consisting of nested temporal scales provide an ideal set of heuristics to accommodate diverse forms of social change into a single overarching framework. Third, chronological frameworks should be flexible to accommodate changing views of the past. While this article has outlined proposed revisions to the Preclassic chronology, similar reconsiderations for later periods are equally necessary and long overdue. It is paramount that empirical evidence informs chronologies, not vice versa. Instead of fitting new data into old

chronologies, these frameworks should be subject to constant revision. The proposed chronological revisions will hopefully spur new

avenues of debate, including reconsiderations of the inflection points in history beyond the focus of this article.

RESUMEN

La investigación arqueológica en curso ha generado una creciente desconexión entre el sistema cronológico mesoamericano y nuestra comprensión de las dinámicas históricas. Sin embargo, en lugar de alterar las cronologías para que se ajusten mejor a los contornos del pasado, la reacción disciplinaria ha sido tratar las fases de desarrollo como unidades temporales fijas y seguir utilizándolas de forma incongruente con su significado definido. El objetivo de este estudio es identificar puntos de inflexión en los contornos de la historia maya, basándose en la evidencia del drenaje del Río Champotón, Campeche. La alfarería más antigua de Champotón, que data de la faceta temprana del preclásico medio, fue una variante regional de

una tradición cerámica de escala pan-mesoamericana. La transición entre las facetas temprana y tardía del preclásico medio fue una era de cambios abruptos, con las comunidades de Champotón convirtiéndose en participantes plenos de la primera tradición de cultura material autóctona generalizada de las Tierras Bajas Mayas. El milenio siguiente se caracterizaría por el conservadurismo y el crecimiento gradual, con continuidad espacial en los lugares de asentamiento y homogeneidad en la cultura material hasta el preclásico tardío. En lugar de forzar estos desarrollos a un marco cronológico incongruente, este artículo propone una revisión de la periodización tradicional del pasado mesoamericano.

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